

# The Performativity of Gender in the Works of David Foster Wallace

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## Abstract

### The Performativity of Gender in the Works of David Foster Wallace

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This thesis continues the recent work on gender in Wallace criticism by positing that his knowledge of feminist critical theory, and the monumental changes in gender politics that occur at Amherst during his time as a student, are key factors in influencing his intellectual engagement with issues of gender, and that this is evidenced in much of his works of fiction and non-fiction alike. I consider how relations between men and women are written, and the dysfunctionality and discord that exist in Wallace's representation of those relationships, in order to demonstrate the way Wallace's texts problematize the heterosexual matrix. Key to this is a questioning of the performativity of gender that occurs throughout Wallace's works. Issues of masculinity and femininity, primarily concerned with Wallace's women, on whom too little is written, also take account of those men Wallace writes who are only ever discussed in terms of masculinity. This is an approach made possible because of the anti-essentialist turn in feminism at this time. I contend that Wallace's *corpus* suggests a more fluid view of gender, where masculinity and femininity are not constrained by sex, and that this problematizing of gender links with aspects of queer feminism.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis uses queer theory as a methodology for reading David Foster Wallace's works and the purpose of this is to offer a form of disruption to heteronormative thinking, particularly around gender and the ways in which gender 'norms' are expressed in literature. The reason for this approach to Wallace's works is due to the ways in which his texts often focus on the inadequacies of language in forming coherent narratives of identity, a sense of self, and a sense of the other. I suggest that Wallace's texts do something other than simply reify the general state-of-being of the homogenous, white, heterosexual male; and that in fact, the whole notion of heterosexual stability and assuredness is shown through the texts to be built upon extremely unstable foundations, and that a key component that Wallace's texts further destabilize is that of conventional notions of gender, and of the ways in which gender operates within society. Frequently, Wallace exposes tacit gender 'norms' and then spends time working through the implications of these in his writings. The aim of the thesis is to provide a nuanced approach to Wallace's works that helps to expose practices that are all too often excused because they sit within the realms of heteronormative thinking, and are accepted (though not unchallenged) to such an extent that little progress is made to eradicate them from society. Specifically, much of the thesis focuses on sexual abuse and rape, as these are topics that span the breadth of Wallace's fictional works and are some of the most disturbing elements. By offering a road map that adds to existing criticism in this area I argue that Wallace's awareness of principles of

feminism and gender theory manifests itself in his texts at both a linguistic and stylistic level. The thesis deals with Wallace's *oeuvre* in chronological order to chart the development of his engagement with gender, with the hope of stimulating further debate.

Building upon the works of critics who have spent time discussing Wallace's works in the areas of gender and sexuality, I am indebted to the writings of Mary K. Holland, Clare Hayes-Brady, Catherine Nichols, Daniela Franca Joffe, Rachel Haley Himmelheber, and Edward Jackson, to name but a few. In a most recent publication, Edward Jackson's work does much to pick through the minutiae of detail found in Wallace's use of sexuality.<sup>1</sup> Jackson asks 'are Wallace's texts misogynist and do they encourage misogyny in their readers', before supplying the answer, 'yes' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 3). Jackson states that the specific 'argument is that Wallace's sexual toxicity is not an example of unthinking prejudice, but rather of his determined attempt to present hideous sexual activities – such as addiction to masturbation, homosexual panic, objectifying gazes and sexual violence – as being integral to masculinity' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 3). Where Jackson's work is invested in grounding masculinity in Wallace's texts as made up of the hideous activities of men, this thesis operates from a position that does not see masculinity as solely the property of men, and that gender hybridity (definition follows shortly) is a more useful way to not only castigate men for harmful practices but also to shake the foundations on which those men base their behaviour. In a discussion of the ways bodies are portrayed, Peter Sloane suggests that for Wallace 'all of sex is deviant, because of the psychodynamics involved in contemporary desire and its correlated or at least postulated dependence *upon*, and transfiguration *into* domination, and the ways in which this both replicates and proliferates culturally, socially, and politically engrained asymmetrical gender relations'.<sup>2</sup> Sloane's intervention casts a critical light on what is predominantly, in Wallace's texts, a heterosexual matrix of sexuality (definition follows shortly) that is rarely portrayed in a positive manner. Where this thesis differs in its approach is that it does not view Wallace's portrayals as merely a proliferation of what

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Jackson, *David Foster Wallace's Toxic Sexuality: Hideousness, Neoliberalism, Spermatism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Sloane, *David Foster Wallace and the Body* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2019), p. 70.

Sloane terms the asymmetry of gender relations, but that Wallace problematizes notions of gender through a form of gender hybridity.

The key terms used in this thesis are outlined here for clarity. *Gender hybridity* describes the way in which many of Wallace's characters exhibit both masculinity and femininity, where simple notions of the gender categories, man and woman, are problematized. *Heterosexual matrix* is taken from Judith Butler's notion that there exists a 'grid of cultural intelligibility [... where] there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender [...] that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality'.<sup>3</sup> *Gender as performative* is also taken from Butler, where 'the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practice of gender coherence', where 'gender proves to be performative [... by] constituting the identity it is purported to be' (Butler, *GT*, pp. 24-5). *Gender discourse* refers to those moments in Wallace's texts where issues of gender and a questioning of axioms of gender occurs most strongly, and where Wallace's writing attempts to work through the implications of tacit gender 'norms'. *Philosophical skepticism* relays a sense of the extent at which Wallace's texts take so little for granted and are instead always questioning absolutes, exposing the unstable ground on which we all stand when bound by language and the terms through which we are categorized. And finally, my use of *queer feminism* to describe the trailblazers of queer theory whose works are so firmly grounded in feminist principles that an amalgamation of the two is appropriate. Notably, this applies to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, and also J. Jack Halberstam. This thesis' use of queer theory challenges our sense of the world as we think we know it, which chimes with Jeffrey Severs' assessment of Wallace's texts as those designed to 'lead up to the precipice of [a] bracing [...] choice to accept birth and be born a second time. His fictions therefore not infrequently end with a greeting to this new self that can only now begin the real struggle, rather than walk off into a presumed state of maturity that obviates the reader's action'.<sup>4</sup> What opportunity Severs sees in Wallace's fiction manifests in this thesis as an occasion to break with rigid axioms of

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversive Identity* (New York: Routledge), p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 7.

gender that serve to replicate toxic, abusive, pernicious, and dysfunctional behaviours *ad infinitum*. In fact, Severs states that '[w]ith Wallace, the taken for granted is where we must look; he wants to expose—and often move—the ground beneath our feet' (p. 10). Wallace's 'persistent concern for philosophical grounds, those overlooked terrors of "abstract thinking" that he dramatizes', is primed for more nuanced approaches as Wallace criticism diversifies ever further into new realms, which is precisely where this thesis situates itself (Severs, *Balancing*, p. 10).

The thesis begins with a discussion of the context for considering Wallace's works as exhibiting a concern with gender discourse. Notably, it is the arrival of Eve Sedgwick at Amherst in 1984 and her infamous 'Sabrina' talk that coincides with Wallace's time at the college that provides the critical stimulation for what I view as Wallace's on-going fascination, and subsequent engagement with gender performativity, and with the gender discourse that dominates the landscape of late twentieth century U.S. culture. Sedgwick's arrival exposes Wallace to a form of feminism that stands in opposition to the essentialist thinking of French feminism at the early stages of his writing career. Andrew Parker, a good friend and respected teacher of Wallace's, gives a sense of the importance of this event in Amherst history when stating that it is a 'talk Dave certainly would have known even if he wasn't in attendance—it appeared verbatim in the student newspaper and dominated local discussion for months'. Following Sedgwick's impact upon Wallace, it is specifically those elements throughout Wallace's *corpus* that highlight the dysfunctionality of the heterosexual matrix and disrupt axioms of gender that are central to this thesis and to Wallace's engagement with gender discourse. Alongside this, Judith Butler's works are tools with which a nuanced discussion of Wallace's works develops, and which help to illuminate aspects of the texts that follow on from the works of Holland, Hayes-Brady, Joffe, Jackson, *et al.* The key thinkers of queer feminism, Sedgwick and Butler, appear throughout the thesis, along with Halberstam, underpinning claims of Wallace as a writer who continually explores and disrupts axioms of gender.

In the chapter on *The Broom of the System* (1986) and *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), the attention to detail that Wallace places upon language and its

use around gender relations comes to the fore.<sup>5</sup> Wallace's choice to begin not only his debut novel but also his short story collection with the controversial topics of campus rape and sexual abuse, respectively, is most telling in this respect. The setting of the opening chapter of *Broom* during the early 1980s at Mount Holyoke, sister college to Amherst (and Amy Wallace's *alma mater*), provides exactly the type of cultural situation that Sedgwick finds on arrival—that of entitled frat boys, with skewed notions of gendered behaviour that is often harmful, and which goes on to pervade the wider U.S. society. Wallace's use of campus rape is shown to differ from his contemporaries, Franzen and Ellis, and I assert that Wallace's text questions such behaviour in a way that their texts do not. In his use of language, Wallace provides the tools with which to challenge the apparent cultural acceptance of campus rape, as set out in examples from Jia Tolentino, Angie Epifano, and Kelly Yang, respectively. Lenore Beadsman's journey is pivotal in this respect, where the language around her narrative constantly signals to the reader of his/her/their own place within a system of language, and which emphasizes the prevalence of gender performativity as axiomatic in the larger cultural setting. Similarly, the tendency for ambiguity to arise is a repeating technique that flows throughout Wallace's *oeuvre*, and this makes space for further questioning to occur. Here, the blend of masculinity and femininity, which speaks to a sense of gender hybridity, problematizes axiomatic notions of gender, particularly in relation to Lenore, Rick, and Lang—and also stemming from Dr Jay's philosophies. Lenore acts as a filter of cultural narrative, giving the first sense that Wallace takes on the role of social commentator, as he takes aim at the very dysfunctionality of the heterosexual matrix. In *Girl with Curious Hair*, issues of both female and male homosexuality, and how they are presented in Wallace's short story collection, are analysed to offer a further view into Wallace's approach to issues of gender.

With a focus on Wallace's non-fiction, Chapters Three and Four further the claim of Wallace's preoccupation with the language around gender, and the influence that this has on the fictional works that follow. Here, Wallace continues to expand upon the questioning of gender axioms, though

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<sup>5</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 2011); David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 2011).

problematically at times. Through his setting up of the 'HIV/AIDS' essay (1998) under a heterosexual rubric, Wallace's text suggests a concern with the language and cultural forms that articulate gender, and demonstrates an attempt at disrupting gender 'norms', shown to be in keeping with Butler's project.<sup>6</sup> This is quite different from his contemporaries, as will be suggested, but is also a way of Wallace positioning his own writing as a move away from the concerns of the Great Male Narcissists (Updike, Mailer, and Roth). The section on Wallace's personal copy of Peter Biskind's text demonstrates the levels of attention that Wallace affords issues of gender, and informs the fiction that follows—of particular interest is the similarity between Mildred Pierce and Avril Incandenza. Here, the concept of gender hybridity, along with the dysfunctionality of gender relations, builds upon the work of *Broom* in this respect.

Wallace's non-fiction is an extension of the type of cultural commentary that seeks to understand the hypocrisy of culturally informed notions of gender. Though not ardently feminist, for reasons fully explained in the chapters, Wallace's non-fiction maintains a focus on the gender discourse of the time—evidenced in his pornography essay (1998), which also points to the fact that in much of his writing Wallace is deliberately provocative in his approach.<sup>7</sup> Both the 'HIV/AIDS' essay and the pornography essay also give an understanding of the extent to which Wallace uses comedic effect, often around challenging issues, and of how the reader is positioned in this respect. The turn to a lengthy and detailed consideration of gender discourse and gender performativity during the second half of Wallace's 'Empty Plenum' problematizes cultural notions of gender that are often read as axiomatic in wider society. It also points to Wallace's fascination with markers of difference, which impinge on relationships between humans. In his shorter reviews on Acker and Hustvedt, Wallace's engagement with a particular strand of feminist discourse reveals a recurring motif in his thinking; one primarily concerned with philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'Hail the Returning Dragon, Clothed in New Fire', in *Shiny Adidas Tracksuits and the Death of Camp: and other essays from Might magazine* (New York: Boulevard Books, 1998). Also to be found published as 'Back in New Fire', and 'The Perverse Blessing of AIDS', and 'Impediments to Passion', respectively.

<sup>7</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Co., 2007).



skepticism and the ontological in/security of woman, the hierarchy of the gender binary, and with the enactment of gender. All of which feeds into, and is expanded upon in Wallace's magnum opus, *Infinite Jest* (1996).<sup>8</sup>

In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's engagement with gender discourse and gender performativity becomes more nuanced, and the text is shown to disrupt implicit 'norms' of gender. Building on from Wallace's biography, where Amy Wallace states that he never felt quite masculine enough, there are plentiful examples of characters performing gender in ways that are not intelligible by conventional societal standards. Judith Butler recognizes that 'being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it. To be not quite masculine or not quite feminine is still to be understood exclusively in terms of one's relationship to the "quite masculine" and the "quite feminine"'.<sup>9</sup> Butler highlights the restrictiveness of thinking around gender, where masculinity and femininity are often viewed as unproblematic terms, and Wallace's text serves to problematize this via its focus on the repetitions and codes that make attributes of gender *seem* axiomatic. Tellingly, the major women of *Infinite Jest* are also placed under the spotlight for a detailed look at how Wallace writes woman, following on from his first attempt at 'cross-writing' (Lenore Beadsman, *Broom*)—here, Wallace is shown to use a hybrid form of masculinity and femininity in his depictions, furthering the notion of the hybridity of gender in his characters. Once more, Butler's thoughts of gender as 'the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized', but also 'the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized' fits with Wallace's project, as his text produces anomalies that are not easily explained (Butler, 'Regulations', p. 42). Once more, as Severs states, this is a sign of Wallace's texts attempting to move the ground beneath our feet in order to expose what is often taken for granted: notions of gender.

The same is also true of Wallace's *Brief Interviews* (1999).<sup>10</sup> This is a collection of short stories that Wallace is said to have described as a 'feminist parody of feminism', where the varied structure and register of the collection

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<sup>8</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest: A Novel* (London: Abacus, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, 'Gender Regulations', in *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 49-65, (p.42).

<sup>10</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) (London: Abacus, 2001).

resists the formation of neat conclusions.<sup>11</sup> Wallace's use of language, with respect to the figuration of relationships that are so routinely governed by gender, highlights the dysfunctionality of gender relations in the heterosexual matrix. Demonstrating this further, a continuation of the themes of rape and sexual violence that are present throughout Wallace's *oeuvre* confirms the trajectory of his engagement with gender discourse. As ever, Wallace's fascination with language use comes to the fore as it is the technical elements of language that serve to disrupt gender norms and practices—where gender is viewed as performative through the lens of language. *Brief Interviews* and some of Wallace's later fiction explore gender norms, and in doing so expose the structures that hold such 'norms' in place. Wallace's texts provide a template with which to question everyday, mundane gender practices that are housed firmly in the heterosexual matrix (the regulatory matrix used to maintain gender intelligibility), and in this respect his work is unique in that the challenge is offered from within this base (Butler, 'Regulations', p. 48).

## 1.1 Feminism's Impact on Gender Discourse in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century

In the early 1980s, as Wallace is studying both philosophy and English at Amherst College (father a philosophy professor and mother an English teacher), significant division and contradiction develop in the discourse around feminist critical theory, a period in which some of its most contested theories also start to appear in the public arena. Wallace was a gifted student, receiving 'A-pluses in [...] literary theory class, epistemology, and ethical theories' and '[s]purred on by his readings in literary theory, he was trying to grow beyond [...] self-referential questions, to answer the question of how to write in a new way' (D.T. Max, *A Life of*, pp. 39, 59). His first published novel, *The Broom of the System* (1986), is evidence of this, as Wallace writes through a female protagonist and begins the story with a theme that is couched in feminism and in gender

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<sup>11</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 247.

discourse.<sup>12</sup> Feminism, as a term, does little to articulate the complexity of feminism itself, or indeed to identify the diversity found from feminist to feminist. Rosi Braidotti offers a view of contemporary feminism in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as beginning to forego its reliance upon purely 'female experience', instead turning to its capacity for creative practice: 'Feminism is a philosophy of change and of becoming: it functions through creative mimesis, that is to say by activating counter-memories'.<sup>13</sup> Braidotti notes feminism's capacity for transformation, as an unceasing process, and one likely to morph in unexpected ways. In this manner, Bryce Traister states 'that feminism has made masculinity studies<sup>[SEP]</sup> possible, even as masculinity studies effectively elides the gynocritical emphasis on<sup>[SEP]</sup> *écriture féminine* and female representative practices', which at once seems to acknowledge a debt to feminism while closing the door on feminists with a resounding dismissal of the feminine *and* the female.<sup>14</sup> In her consideration of women's experiences in non-Western cultures, Nancy J. Hirschmann critiques the fact that oftentimes, feminism assumes a form of 'cultural imperialism' as it fails to recognize its own tendency to speak from white, middle-class positions of 'authority', while 'arguing about issues of sensitivity to cultural specificity and difference'.<sup>15</sup> These relatively contemporary considerations of feminism speak to the fact that feminism is complex, ever changing, and context specific.

Feminism is used, here, specifically in the context of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century onwards, where feminists are entrenched in discussions around three key issues: gender, sex, and sexuality. Sex is often grounded in biological 'facts', yet relatively little understanding of the diversity of the sexed body makes it into the public domain.<sup>16</sup> Instead, society is invested in conversations that definitively split the human subject into male and female.

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<sup>12</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Rosi Braidotti, 'Nomadism with a Difference: Deleuze's Legacy in a Feminist Perspective', *Man and World*, 29 (1996), 305-314, (pp. 310, 312).

<sup>14</sup> Bryce Traister, 'Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies', *American Quarterly*, 52 (2000), 274-304, (p. 300).

<sup>15</sup> Nancy J. Hirschmann, 'Western Feminism, Eastern Veiling, and the Question of Free Agency', *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 5 (1998), 345-368, (p. 345).

<sup>16</sup> See, Anon., *Free & Equal: United Nations for Intersex Awareness*, <https://www.unfe.org/intersex-awareness/> (2020). Statistics that state up to 1.7% of the population is born neither male nor female, but any combination of the two in terms of genitalia, chromosome patterns, and hormone level, are far from prevalent in everyday conversation.

Sexuality tends to be restricted to a heterosexual domain where educational matters are concerned, which is where the majority of the population in a Western cultural context will receive such indoctrination.<sup>17</sup> Gender is often mistakenly used as a substitute for sex in a wider cultural context, and is notoriously difficult to pin down. In a discussion of masculinity, J. Jack Halberstam, states that though recognizing masculinity is not necessarily an issue, defining it in any meaningful way is still a goal that eludes us.<sup>18</sup> Effectively, masculinity and femininity are terms used widely, yet their common use does not necessarily mean that they are fully understood by those using the terms. KelleyAnne Malinen cites Judith Butler's work on gender as utilizing:

[T]he Derridian observation that marks signify by referencing past uses in new contexts with the way we enter the world of hegemonic heterosexuality when declared girls or boys. From that moment on, we are socially shaped so that very often we come, generally if never completely, to identify with and embody those initial attributions. We embody and are animated by our genders through processes of subjectification, for gender attributions do not refer to nature but reiterate an illusion of it.<sup>19</sup>

This is an example of gender discourse, where the language around gender confirms its status as a 'fact' of the human condition, at once demonstrating the existence of a strategy that estranges the language around gender terms. Once more, this speaks to a sense that gender attributions pervade the collective consciousness of Western society, but that still these are 'learned' without a clear or evidenced mode of learning. In a discussion of gender polarization, Sandra Bem discusses 'the highly gender-managed U.S. society' in which 'social life [...] is dichotomously organized around the male-female distinction', whereby the relationship between the two categories of sex and gender is exposed to show the ways in which they have become inextricably linked, even

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<sup>17</sup> See Francesca Rayner, *The Butch, the Femme and the Surrogate Mother: Representations of Women in Contemporary Queer Drama*, *Comunicação e Cidadania. Actas do 5º Congresso Da SOPCOM* (2008), p. 1657. Here, Rayner articulates the perniciousness at the heart of the UK government's Section 28, which made all talk of non-heterosexual relations illegal in school settings, amongst others, until its repeal in 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 1. [Published under the dead name of the critic now known as J. Jack Halberstam].

<sup>19</sup> KelleyAnne Malinen, "Thinking Woman-to-Woman Rape: A Critique of Marcus's 'Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention'", *Sexuality & Culture*, 17 (2013), 360-376, (p. 362).

though they are now understood to differ from one another.<sup>20</sup> This is gender discourse in the most practical sense, where its effect on society is pervasive.

Comparing various strands of feminism evidences differences between French feminism and the morph from feminism to queer theory, for example, which is a significant occurrence for this thesis and its reading of Wallace's *corpus*. Indeed, a shift occurs that signals a move by some feminists away from a reliance on essentialist notions of categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, respectively. This leads to the birth of queer theory, an offshoot of feminism that is fundamentally indebted to the feminist discourse that precedes it. Cited by many as a major factor in this occurrence is Gayle Rubin who begins the 1980s by documenting the so-called feminist 'sex wars' of the early 80s, where 'sex-positive' feminists highlight the gulf that exists within feminism around issues of sexuality and sexual practices.<sup>21</sup> This specific moment in feminist history illustrates the discord that can occur around emotive topics, and highlights the danger of assuming that feminism signals a movement filled with homogeneous thought—and one only needs to consider the current battle between trans-exclusionary radical feminists and trans women, around issues of public bathrooms, to see that inharmoniousness continues to this day under the umbrella term of feminism.<sup>22</sup> Arguably, this period of feminism is amongst its most divisive, yet there are positives to be taken from it. Annamarie Jagose documents Rubin's worth to forms of feminism past and present, and to those feminists who seem to hold differing views around sex and gender.<sup>23</sup> Jagose clarifies this approach by observing Rubin's own efforts to speak in terms of 'a universal feminism', while noting that the 'historical context for her [Rubin's] intervention is strongly shaped by what are often described as the feminist sex wars in which 'feminism' stood for oppositional rather than coherent perspectives' (Jagose, 'FQT', p. 164). Out of this period of hostility, questions

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<sup>20</sup> Sandra L. Bem, *The Lenses of Gender; Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 80, in JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org.liverpool.idm.oclc.org/stable/j.ctt1nq86n>>.

<sup>21</sup> See Susan Stryker, 'The Time has Come to Think about Gayle Rubin', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17 (2011), 79-83, and Annamarie Jagose and Don Kulick, 'Thinking Sex/Thinking Gender: Introduction', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10 (2004), 211-212.

<sup>22</sup> Two recent works detailing this topic are: Patricia Elliot, *Debates in Transgender, Queer, and Feminist Theory: Contested Sites* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), and Laura Portuondo, 'The Overdue Case Against Sex-Segregated Bathrooms', *Yale JL & Feminism*, 29 (2017), 465.

<sup>23</sup> See Annamarie Jagose, 'Feminism's Queer Theory', *Feminism & Psychology*, 19 (2009), 157-174.

around who and what feminism is for become more complex, and this fragmentation of perspective provides opportunities with which to probe important questions around issues of gender.

This thesis posits that Wallace's knowledge of feminist critical theory, and the monumental changes in gender politics that occur at Amherst during his time as a student, are key factors in influencing his intellectual engagement with gender discourse, and that this is evidenced in much of his works of fiction and non-fiction alike. This cultural shift in feminism, at times divisive, manifests itself in the gender discourse that Wallace engages with throughout his writing career. This development in feminist discourse brings about a heightened sense of self-consciousness, where routine behaviours are questioned in more detail, and with particular emphasis on the use of language, which precisely mirrors Severs' claims of Wallace's fiction and the claims made in this thesis. And this is key to Wallace's engagement with gender discourse, particularly around his depiction of relations between the genders—the majority of which occur in a heterosexual setting.

Jagose notes the emergence of two key texts that follow as a direct result of Gayle Rubin's experience with a particular strand of radical feminism: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), respectively. Sedgwick's assertion is that gender and sexuality are distinct from one another, though inextricably linked, and that this tension provides a useful space with which to consider the two, though Sedgwick's concern seems mostly around issues of male homosexuality.<sup>24</sup> Butler's text signals a move whereby regulatory practices around issues of gender identity are seen to underpin the so-called normative status of heterosexuality, and of its practices, thus securing its position as the framework within which intelligible subjects are maintained. Both Sedgwick's and Butler's texts offer new directions from which questions around gender discourse can be hypothesized. Yet it is Butler's engagement with and attempt to dislodge the terminology of gender, that seems automatically to confer itself upon heterosexuality (a placeholder for gender), which is of particular interest. Also of importance is the move away from essentialist positions, and Jagose notes

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<sup>24</sup> Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (California: University of California Press, 2008), p.30.

that Butler's 'anti-essentialist understanding of queer is informed by her earlier influential deliberations on performativity, a term she uses to bring to attention the way in which normative reiterations bring into being the identity categories they seem only to express' (Jagose, 'FQT', p. 163). In focusing on the effects of gender, for example, and its iterations, Butler negates the insistence on always having to consider a feminist position as springing from a concern with the category of women. Jagose elaborates further on this by positioning Butler as a critic who '[t]akes feminist critiques of the category of women as her starting point, [and that] Butler develops Michel Foucault's understanding of the productivity of power in order to argue that, since power brings into being the subjects it only claims to govern and regulate, the category *women* is not the grounds of feminism's project of political representation but its discursive effect' (Jagose, 'FQT', p. 163). Here then, rooting oneself as a feminist purely in terms of a relation to the category of women is not altogether productive, nor is it progressive, at least not according to Butler, Jagose, and Sedgwick, respectively. This thesis demonstrates that this is the case for Wallace also, where an unequal weighting of male characters, or even an absence of female characters can be read as an expression of feminist perspective.<sup>25</sup>

## 1.2 Wallace and Feminist Critical Theory

Prior to this development in feminism is an aspect of feminist critical theory that adopts essentialist thinking as its hallmark: French feminism. French feminism is invested in the question of the category of women, and it is a strand of feminism that certainly stands in opposition to that of Sedgwick's and Butler's theories on issues of gender, and one that Wallace was familiar with through his study of literary theory. Christine Delphy, a founder of materialist feminism, provides a helpful insight into the absurdity not only of the term French feminism, but also of using the term feminist to describe the 'Holy

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<sup>25</sup> For instance, the 'BI #' stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) all share a silent female interlocutor as their connecting feature, though it is the female interlocutor that drives the narrative, dictating the course of the fiction, and causing readers to ask more question of the texts. See, David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001). Hereafter, referred to as *Brief Interviews* or *BI*.

Three' of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray.<sup>26</sup> In fact, all references to French Feminism throughout the first eight pages of Delphy's essay appear in inverted commas until she sets the rubric for not continuing to do so. For Delphy, French Feminism is 'an Anglo-American strand of intellectual production within an Anglo-American context', which refers 'exclusively to this Anglo-American body of writings and its Anglo-American authors' (Delphy, p. 173). Delphy then sets out to provide her own descriptions of the most striking features of French feminism. The first two listed are: 'the conflation of "women" and the "feminine" and conversely, of "men" and "the masculine"; and 'the focus on "the feminine" and "the masculine," the belief that these exist—or should exist—and that they provide or should provide a model for what actual women and men do and "are"; (Delphy, p. 174). A link with the methods of queer theory is provided in the manner of questioning what for some are axioms of the human condition. Namely, these are the concepts of masculinity and femininity, which maintain the notion of difference in humans in that they uphold the idea that there are two kinds of human being: male and female (Delphy, p.179). Here, a gap in current Wallace studies exists because critics rarely question such axioms when examining his works: Wallace's men are read as masculine, while his women are read as feminine—this thesis problematizes that approach, and also the fact that Wallace's women are largely undervalued and not treated to the same critical scrutiny as Wallace's men.

Delphy situates the invention of French feminism as a means of attempting to 'rescue psychoanalysis from the discredit it had incurred both in feminism and throughout the social sciences', a contention that she aims to make more concrete by noting the rarely mentioned fact that two of its 'holy three' (Irigaray and Kristeva) are practicing psychoanalysts, and therefore have a commercial interest in the renewed, and reinvigorated 'profession' of psychoanalysis (Delphy, pp. 186-7). Equally damning is Delphy's claim that at the time of writing the essay (2000), Irigaray has only recently begun referring to herself as a feminist, and that Cixous' and Kristeva's respective 'antifeminist declarations' are widely ignored by those followers of French feminism as being

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<sup>26</sup> Christine Delphy, 'The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move', in *Yale French Studies* (2000), 166-197, (p. 189), in JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2903219>>.



'nonrelevant' to the cause (Delphy, p. 187). In part, the issue with all three is their reliance on essentialist ideas of the masculine and the feminine, and that to think of men and women outside of such constraints is nigh on impossible. For example, Irigaray theorizes that 'we must move on to the model of the two, a two which is not a replication of the same, nor one large and the other small, but made up of two which are truly different. The paradigm of the two lies in sexual difference'.<sup>27</sup> To clarify, Irigaray asserts that '[t]he existence of two subjects is probably the only thing that can bring the masculine subject back to his being, and this thanks to woman's access to her own being. To accomplish this goal, the feminine subject had to be freed from the world of man to make way for a philosophical scandal: the subject is not one, nor is it singular' (Irigaray, p. 12). For Irigaray, the masculine subject is man, while the feminine subject is woman, and the two (masculinity and femininity) cannot co-exist, ergo, a man can never be thought of in feminine terms and a woman can never be thought of in masculine terms. This is a hallmark of essentialism, in that it provides no room to consider that masculinity and femininity can exist in a single subject (whether man *or* woman).

Similarly, Cixous exhibits similar essentialist tendencies, evidenced most clearly in her ideas of *écriture féminine*. Although, unlike Irigaray, Cixous allows for the possibility of masculinity and femininity to combine in a single subject when she declares that 'I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man. So only an oblique consideration will be found here of man; it's up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at', this is swiftly followed by a Lacanian psychoanalyst position, where woman is said to forever lack phallic power.<sup>28</sup> Once more, essentialism is in evidence if woman is always considered in this way, as lacking what a man does not. Here, Simone de Beauvoir, in a discussion of Cixous' writing on the subject, declares that 'there is something false in this search for a purely feminine writing style. [...] [T]o create a language all of a piece which would be a women's language, that I find quite insane. [...] I am not at all for a feminism which is entirely separatist, which

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<sup>27</sup> Luce Irigaray and Noah Guynn, 'The Question of the Other', *Yale French Studies* (1995), 7-19, (pp.11-12).

<sup>28</sup> Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1 (1976), 875-893, (pp. 877-9, 884-5).

would say, “this domain is purely for women.” I don’t believe that at all’.<sup>29</sup> Again, the move to a reliance on difference marks Cixous’ work as essentialist. And finally, Kristeva, who champions the idea of the ‘abhorrent mother’ from whom the (male) child must flee, offering an alternative to Freud’s Oedipus complex, is accused by some of making ‘misogyny universal, biologically determined, and inevitable’, and of assuming an ‘antifeminist, biologicistic, essentialist, and universalist model of gender and society’.<sup>30</sup> Effectively, Kristeva places the mother as the primary abject figure, and by whom we all should feel repelled. Delphy hits a rich vein of thought when accusing the ‘holy three’ of essentialist thought.

It is claimed that Wallace admired the work of the French feminists (Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva), and here, Adam Kelly roots this influence in Wallace’s admiration of Derrida’s works.<sup>31</sup> Yet for the arc of this thesis’ trajectory it is the situating of queer feminist theory as a methodology for considering Wallace’s works that proves most useful, as Wallace problematizes gender in many of his characters. Doing so provides a tension between these two distinct approaches of feminism, and this is evident in Wallace’s texts in the anxiety and overt self-consciousness the characters display, for example. Indeed, a form of philosophical skepticism that engages with the gender discourse of the time can be seen throughout much of Wallace’s *corpus*.<sup>32</sup> Though the writings of the French feminists appear firmly fixed by notions of essentialism around issues of gender, a key question here is how such writings actually inform Wallace’s position, particularly with respect to his feminist project, *Brief Interviews*. If *Brief Interviews* is to be viewed as a work positioning itself alongside the writings of the French feminists, the potential for nuanced discussions around issues of gender are constrained—especially when one considers the problems that French feminism poses to contemporary discourse

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<sup>29</sup> Alice Jardine and Simone de Beauvoir, ‘Interview with Simone De Beauvoir’, *Signs*, 5 (1979), 224-236 (pp. 229-31), in *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173558>>.

<sup>30</sup> Janet L. Jacobs, *Religion, Society, and Psychoanalysis: Readings in Contemporary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 253.

<sup>31</sup> See Adam Kelly, ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men’, in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 84. Kelly cites the following works as evidence of this. See D. T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Penguin, 2013); and Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Seen, initially, in Lenore Beadsman (*The Broom of the System*), this is also evident in many other characters and will be discussed in later chapters.

on gender. Equally, if it is ‘these theorists’ interrogation [Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray] of the question of the feminine – and particularly the question of how the feminine can and should be represented in writing – that provided vital inspiration for the imaginative landscape and storytelling techniques of *Brief Interviews*, then it is curious to note the ways in which Wallace’s fiction does not always adhere to essentialist notions around issues of gender (Kelly, ‘Brief Interviews’, p. 84). Indeed, *Brief Interviews* is a book that takes a stance in masculinist discourse but this should not be viewed as necessarily condoning its most disturbing aspects. Adam Kelly’s essay is helpful when positioning Wallace’s writing in terms of its relation to gender discourse. Kelly asks: ‘what should the reader make of this description of a set of stories that feature virtually no female voices amid a cacophony of misogynistic male ones’ (Kelly, ‘Brief Interviews’, p. 83)? Indeed, this is intriguing and demands a considered answer precisely because of the levels of misogyny on display, and with only the language of male voices to discuss, as female voices are largely absent.

Kelly continues: ‘[d]oes *Brief Interviews* represent a parody of feminism or a feminist parody of feminism, and what would the difference between these be (Kelly, ‘Brief Interviews’, p. 83)?’<sup>33</sup> The question poses a serious problem for anyone attempting to decipher it because of the implied scope indicated in the broadness of the terms, feminist and feminism, respectively, and also because it is not immediately clear what Wallace is attempting to parody. Kelly begins with an analysis of ‘BI #28’, where ‘two men offer their views on the sexual psychology of the contemporary woman’, and continues by outlining why Wallace thought of his ‘book’s project as a feminist one’, and why this remains contentious (Kelly, ‘Brief Interviews’, pp. 82-3). Indeed, Kelly tackles this head on by stating that ‘there remains a question as to whether, as a male author, Wallace’s writing might justifiably be read as *écriture féminine* or whether the disruptive mimicry recommended by [Luce] Irigaray is only available to those born as women’ (Kelly, ‘Brief Interviews’, p. 84). The question guides this thesis in respect of the reading of Lenore Beadsman (the protagonist of Wallace’s debut novel, *The Broom of the System*), and also a reading of Wallace’s review of

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<sup>33</sup> See Max, *A Life of*, p. 247. Where he notes that in a letter to ‘his old Amherst teacher [Professor] Andrew Parker’ Wallace refers to the collection as “a parody (a feminist parody) of feminism”, though they were also a postmodernist parody of postmodernism’, according to Max.

David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. It will continue to inform and guide the thesis more widely, as the subject of feminism, feminist critical theory, and gender discourse are important to a consideration of Wallace's writings. For the purposes of this thesis it is the work born of feminism's morph into queer theory, which happens at around the same time as Wallace is writing, that provides the theoretical framework to consider those areas that provoke an uneasy engagement with feminism: misogyny, abuse, objectification, and the absence of the female, etc.

### 1.3 Wallace, Masculinity, Amherst, and Sedgwick

Where queer theory's power radiates from its slipperiness in terms (what does the 'queer' of queer theory actually stand for?) but also in its aims (what does it set out to accomplish?), a nuanced reading of Wallace's works benefits from this elusiveness and 'undecidability'.<sup>34</sup> For example, the apparent 'flattening out' of gender markers, seen in both the use of and in the omission of gendered pronouns in *Brief Interviews*, along with a loosening of the association with male and female characters of so-called 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits in *Infinite Jest* (1996), and the philosophical skepticism leading to speculation of what it means to always think of oneself as made up of half-sperm that occurs in *The Broom of the System* (1986) (these aspects are discussed in later chapters), all speak to the possibilities of reading Wallace against the grain.<sup>35</sup> This is pertinent considering Wallace's own philosophical background and of having a philosophy professor as a father. Equally, a biographical moment from Wallace's own life, as told by his sister, Amy Wallace, stresses the potential that exists in not limiting and/or defining Wallace's writings through his status as a male author. Again, if male equates to masculinity for the majority of readers and the wider U.S. society, and if masculinity is somehow just imbued upon its

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<sup>34</sup> Examples of works dealing with questions such as these are: C. Dinshaw, and others, 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13 (2007), 177; Carla Freccero, 'Queer Times', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106 (2007), 485-494; and Elizabeth Freeman, 'Still After', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106 (2007), 495.

<sup>35</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest: A Novel* (London: Abacus, 2009); David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 2011). Hereafter, *Infinite Jest* referred to as *IJ*, *The Broom of the System* as *Broom*.

subjects, then to restrict a consideration of Wallace's works based upon notions of masculinity alone seems reductive.<sup>36</sup>

Amy Wallace comments that her brother "always had [mumbled] conviction that he should be more masculine than he was" and that his preference was to wear his hair in a topknot (decades before hipster-fashion made the style culturally acceptable for men).<sup>37</sup> When discussing how she and friends of Wallace's tried to dissuade him for wearing his hair in a topknot, she confesses it is because they were embarrassed to be seen with him in public this way. Amy Wallace frames her approach to her brother in terms of the potential impact on his feelings, of possessing an inferior sense of masculinity, and reassures her brother that their dislike of being seen with him wearing his hair in a topknot was not a reflection on his masculinity, when clearly, for Amy Wallace and her/her brother's friends, it was (Anon., 'Amy Wallace', 04:15-05:30/38:01). In fact, it is a precise indication of the state of masculinist culture in 1980s/90s' America, where a simple hairstyle impacts not only on how one views oneself, but of how one is viewed by others in terms of attributes of gender—in this instance, masculinity. Again, this indicates the ways in which gender discourse is filtering into popular culture, leading to self-consciousness and anxiety, and that the capacity for questioning what were once thought of as axioms is mounting.<sup>38</sup>

Here, the period in which Wallace is studying at Amherst (1980-85, with an absence during 1981-82 due to depression), and producing what will become his debut novel, *The Broom of the System*, is particularly relevant to this thesis. Not only does it mark a high point in academic theory in the U.S., where the likes of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva all stand as prominent figures, and where Wallace (the student) is fascinated and inspired by the works of Derrida (and the French feminists who follow), but it also stands as a moment where

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<sup>36</sup> A good example of a critical work that focuses solely on issues of masculinity in Wallace, at times bending masculinity to fit its purpose, is Andrew S. Delfino's *Becoming the New Man in Post-Postmodernist Fiction: Portrayals of Masculinities in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest and Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club* (Saabrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr Müller, 2008). Delfino's work, here, is discussed in a later chapter detailing *Infinite Jest*.

<sup>37</sup> Anon., *Amy Wallace Speaks about Her Brother David Foster Wallace*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drLEdNmbv5A> (YouTube, 2014), 04:15-05:30/38:01. And this begs the question: if Wallace considered himself this way, what exactly did he feel he possessed instead—elements of femininity?

<sup>38</sup> See Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, p.27. Here, sexuality and gender are just two components of axiomatics that Sedgwick discusses.

notions borne out of what is soon to become known as queer theory come to prominence both within the academy and popular culture.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, in 1984 as Wallace studies the works of Derrida, and admires the works of the French feminists, as Kelly states earlier, Eve Sedgwick takes up position of Associate Professor of English at Amherst College, and is instrumental in creating its Women's and Gender Studies Department.<sup>40</sup> Effectively, U.S. academic institutions such as Amherst are becoming battlegrounds where gender politics is hotly contested, and where skepticism around how gender is expressed grows on campuses. Indeed, soon after landing at Amherst Sedgwick delivers a talk detailing the college's history of misogyny, which is later published in the *Amherst* magazine as 'Sabrina Doesn't Live here Anymore'.<sup>41</sup> In a personal communication between myself and Wallace's 'favorite literature theory teacher', Andrew Parker, Parker notes that this was a 'talk Dave certainly would have known even if he wasn't in attendance—it appeared verbatim in the student newspaper and dominated local discussion for months', which cements the importance of the event in Amherst history at that time (Max, *A Life of*, p. 100).<sup>42</sup> Sabrina, a statue of a nude female, is the infamously mistreated college 'mascot', and it is noteworthy that in 1982 Wallace and his friend, Mark Costello, 'revived the campus humor magazine, *Sabrina*', which they loosely modeled on the *Harvard Lampoon* (Max, *A Life of*, p. 26). Sabrina, the only 'woman' on campus for over a century is abused and ridiculed, both literally (at the hands of countless students over the years) and metaphorically (in the appropriation of her name for the magazine). This is indicative of attitudes

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<sup>39</sup> See D.T. Max, *A Life of*, pp. 37-38. Here, Max notes that during the two semesters following his return, in the 'second semester of the 1983-84 school year', Wallace showed his commitment to writing fiction by studying writing, and began by taking 'a course in literary approaches and theory and reveled in Jacques Derrida's essays'. Max affirms Derrida as a 'long-lasting influence' on Wallace, and that he confessed to 'his professor, Andrew Parker, that he was happy to find a philosopher who cared about literature'.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Parker, The Path-Breaker, <https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/magazine/issues/2009summer/collegerow/sedgwick/node/120252> (2009). This is significant for the fact that Amherst has only recently begun admitting female students (academic year 1975-76). In his final year at Amherst, Wallace bears witness to revolutionary changes in gender politics on campus.

<sup>41</sup> Published in the spring of 1985 as Eve K. Sedgwick, 'Sabrina Doesn't Live here Anymore', *Amherst*, 37 (Spring 1985), 12-21, this is actually 'the text of a talk, subtitled "Gender Pride and Gender Prejudice at Amherst College," which Professor Sedgwick delivered in the Converse Assembly Room last November [1984] as part of a "Forum on Diversity" sponsored by the college's Orientation Committee' (p. 13). Wallace returned to campus in the autumn of 1982 following some form of psychological breakdown, and later graduated from Amherst in 1985, and so is well situated, as an English major, to experience the monumental shift taking place in terms of gender dynamics at the college (Max, *A Life of*, p.24).

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Parker, Query on Memory and 'French Feminists' (2020).

towards women at Amherst, and Sedgwick makes plain the difficulties female students face upon entering this previously all-male educational facility: '[t]o start with, I think women students at a place like Amherst [...] feel eager to fit in, grateful to be here, wanting to buy in as much as possible' (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 14). She continues by noting the myth of 'reverse discrimination' that has taken hold in the U.S., and the issues that female graduates will face when entering the workplace—where all of a sudden, being a woman in the job market is meant to signify advantage, when it is clear that it does not (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 14).

Sedgwick warns that 'this puts you in a tricky position if you're an undergraduate woman' because it will lead to feelings of vulnerability and paranoia, and counsels the students on what to expect if they turn to feminism for support: 'if you're a woman and you're a feminist, or becoming a feminist, there's always that sword hanging over your head of being called a lesbian' (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p.14). The atmosphere at Amherst mimics wider U.S. society at that time, where misogyny is evident both explicitly and surreptitiously, and where anxiety, self-consciousness, and skepticism accompany debates around issues of gender. All of which creates 'double binds' for women, where any and all action can be misconstrued as 'wrong', because it is always judged against how men behave and perform (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 15). Sedgwick exposes and emphasizes the extent of institutionalized misogyny that not only governs Amherst College but all of U.S. society, and in doing so holds up a mirror for those white, affluent males who most benefit from such a system (men like Wallace). This is the setting where Wallace receives not only an academic education but also an education in how society and relationships work in the early-mid 1980s—where there are very few female role models, where female students are unsure of their place within the system, and where in ninety-eight percent of the courses available to students at Amherst there is an 'absence of women and gender perspective from the curriculum' (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 16). Such an environment sounds neither desirable, nor healthy for the production of well-adjusted young men (or women), and this is the setting in which gender discourse must take place in order to effect change.

Here, there is a hint of the cultural framework that informs the opening chapter of *Broom*. It is a chapter that sits apart from the rest of the novel, both thematically and chronologically. The chapter is so at odds with the remainder of the text that even now it remains relatively untouched by critics some thirty-plus years later. The setting is Mount Holyoke College (Amy Wallace's *alma mater*), the institution from which a transfer student goes on to claim the title of being the first woman to graduate with a B.A. from Amherst.<sup>43</sup> Most pointedly, the bulk of the chapter is in the form of philosophical speculation over issues that are of serious concern to *all* women to this day: rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment and intimidation.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the 'double binds' that women must contend with, on which Sedgwick places great emphasis, are most evident in Wallace's portrayal of *IJ*'s Avril Incandenza, arguably the archetype for all mothers ('moms'). And following this, Sedgwick's talk incorporates a meditation on masculinity that sounds not all that dissimilar from the 'hideous men' of Wallace's *Brief Interviews*:

Don't men have conflicting demands too? Of course. [...] Be sensitive, but be macho. Be feminists. You can't be a feminist, you're a man. Be well groomed and well behaved, but don't be effeminate. Bond closely with other men. But don't bond too closely with other men. Or if you do bond very closely with other men, find some female figure to route it through, like the Sabrina (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 17).

Sedgwick asserts that the double binds that women face are not all that different from those that men have to contend with. However, she does make it plain that 'for men, the pathway from Amherst College to positions of real power in the world is relatively clear and unobstructed', and that for things to change men need to start recognizing the fact (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 17). And Sedgwick asserts that 'good' men benefit from the fact that 'bad' men exist (the misogynists and rapists), because it makes them look even better propositions to those women hoping to avoid negative contact with men, and so the cultural economy of many of Wallace's hideous men appears to have been anticipated

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<sup>43</sup> See Emily G. Boutilier, *In these Times*, <https://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/magazine/issues/2011fall/inthesetimes/node/361369> (2011).

<sup>44</sup> See Chapter Two for a discussion of this.



for Wallace at a very early stage in his writing career. For instance, when addressing the men in the audience, Sedgwick asks them to consider that:

What you probably *feel* most strongly, if you're one of these supportive men, is the loss that you suffer because other men are violent against women. You feel that women don't trust you as you wish they would, and as you feel you deserve to be trusted. You feel a loss in the possibilities of intimacy that you think you deserve. Those are real damages. But what you aren't feeling is how high your market level rises as a nonviolent, supportive, and sympathetic man: how much in demand you are, how rare you are, and how valued you are for these traits that really ought to be able to be taken for granted from *all* men (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 17, emphasis original).

Again, this is in harmony with so many of the men that Wallace writes, from Rick Vigorous, to Orin Incandenza, and most of the 'hideous men'. Sedgwick's care in mentioning that it is *all* men who should be expected to be kind and considerate towards women, and that those men who are do not escape criticism, itself provides the potential for retort—perhaps even a riposte in the form of a feminist parody of feminism? Sedgwick's arrival at Amherst is nothing short of revolutionary, in terms of her impact around gender discourse at the college, and the wider U.S. society. Wallace is witness to this particular articulation of feminism, and so when questioning his fiction in relation to topics of misogyny, abuse, objectification, and the absence of the female, etc., it is important to bear in mind his background in gender discourse, because he actively engages with important issues of gender throughout his *corpus*, most often in the form of philosophical speculation and skepticism.<sup>45</sup>

## 1.4 Wallace Studies: Setting the Scene

The critical body that exists on the works of Wallace varies widely in subject matter, which attests to the diversity and scope of Wallace's writing itself, and it continues to evolve as readings splinter to form new modes of enquiry.<sup>46</sup> From

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<sup>45</sup> Albeit problematically, at times. This will be discussed in later chapters.

<sup>46</sup> A few examples of this are: Catherine Nichols, 'Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Critique Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 43 (2001). Nichols' essay views *IJ* through a Bakhtinian-carnavalesque lens; Emily Russell, 'Some Assembly Required: The Embodied Politics of *Infinite Jest*', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 66 (2010), 147-

the early days of Wallace studies, one of its most prominent scholars, Stephen J. Burn, claims to write on Wallace 'out of an evangelical zeal to share his work with as many people as possible', and states that Wallace's suicide is 'a grim prophecy [... ensuring] that he would now only speak to us from beyond the grave'.<sup>47</sup> This reflects the general turn following Wallace's suicide, that the writings must be championed in order that they live on after his death. Burn's language speaks of Wallace in terms of hagiography, as does Zadie Smith when she discusses Wallace's talent and his own appreciation of the gifts he possessed. Smith claims that Wallace saw these 'not as a natural resource to be exploited but as a suspicious facility to be interrogated'.<sup>48</sup> Smith continues with talk of Wallace's 'unusual triune skill set – encyclopedic knowledge, mathematical prowess, complex dialectical thought', and while much of this is evident throughout Wallace's *corpus* Smith adds a martyr-like quality to the man himself when she states that he 'chose the path of most resistance. He turned from a career in maths and philosophy to pursue a vocation in what he called "morally passionate, passionately moral fiction"', which certainly lends itself to a form of hagiography (Smith, p. 258). This is understandable, given the sadness and shock that accompanies death, especially from suicide. Burn, Smith, and many others produce insightful readings of Wallace's work, yet there is often a sense that those critics hold Wallace in saint-like regard.

In recent times, however, scholarly emphasis shifts from a concern with preserving Wallace's legacy, to readings that question the motivations and actions of the man behind the works, along with the most disturbing elements within.<sup>49</sup> Arguably a response to the rise of the #MeToo movement, where a collective moment occurs of survivors speaking out against abuse, which leads

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169. Russell's essay on *IJ* asks questions around the topic of bodily-disfiguration; Frank L. Cioffi, "'An Anguish Become Thing': Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *Narrative*, 8 (2000), 161-181. Cioffi speaks of the performative aspects of Wallace's text; and Paul Giles, 'Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53 (2007), 327-344, in *SCOPUS* [accessed 24 March 2014]. Giles concludes that Wallace's sentimental posthumanism is in keeping with American pastoral tradition. These are but a mere sample of the diversity of topics in Wallace studies.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen J. Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide (Second Edition)*. [2003] (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Zadie Smith, *Changing my Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), p. 258.

<sup>49</sup> Two recent works that touch upon these aspects are: Stephanie Lambert "'The Real Dark Side, Baby': New Sincerity and Neoliberal Aesthetics in David Foster Wallace and Jennifer Egan", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (2020), 1-18. Lambert pays particular attention to *BI*; and to a lesser extent, Charlotte Shane's, 'What Men Want', *Dissent*, 66 (2019), 132-137, which makes fleeting reference of Wallace's fascination with pornography, in relation to Andrea Dworkin's radical feminism.

to previously silenced voices being heard in public for the first time. From this springs Mary Karr's claim that she is a survivor of violent and stalker-like behaviour and that Wallace, her ex-boyfriend, was the culprit.<sup>50</sup> This leads to more pointed criticism of Wallace's works, whereby the stories of 'hideous men', rapists, and abusers take on new meanings. The most infamous example of this must be Amy Hungerford's refusal to read or even to assign Wallace's works to her students. Indeed, Hungerford also recognizes some of the issues early on in Wallace studies, where '[t]he glow of Saint Dave casts its hazy effects on the reputation of the man and his fiction, making both harder to see'.<sup>51</sup> Hungerford attacks Wallace's legacy with fervour, and while there are issues with her approach, not least of which is the accusation that her polemical essay on Wallace (later a chapter in *Making Literature Now*) acts as a means of publicity for her forthcoming book, the contention remains valid that the more disturbing and controversial aspects of Wallace's *corpus* are obscured from view, precisely because of the 'Saint Dave' mantle.<sup>52</sup>

Hungerford's stance is a reaction to what she sees as the 'long thread of what might be called abuse—physical and psychic—running through' the relationships that Wallace had with women (Hungerford, p. 145). Hungerford's essay/chapter is scathing of Wallace, and she asks: '[D]oes David Foster Wallace have anything to say about women, or gender, or sex, or misogyny that's worth attending to' (Hungerford, p.149)? If asking the question through a lens where Wallace himself and his behaviour towards women are the focalizer, then probably not. However, if the focus remains on the details found in the language around issues of misogyny, and in the way gender relations are presented in his fiction, then the answer to Hungerford's question must be, yes.<sup>53</sup> The focus of this thesis is on those areas of Wallace's *corpus* that invite gender analysis because of the discomfort that surrounds issues of rape, abuse, and toxic

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<sup>50</sup> See Megan Garber, 'David Foster Wallace And The Dangerous Romance Of Male Genius', *The Atlantic*, 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/the-world-still-spins-around-male-genius/559925/>> [Accessed 2 December 2019].

<sup>51</sup> Amy Hungerford *Making Literature Now* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p.147.

<sup>52</sup> See Tom LeClair, 'Making Literature Now - Amy Hungerford', <http://www.full-stop.net/2016/10/20/reviews/tomleclair/making-literature-now-amy-hungerford/> (2016), [10 Apr 2020].

<sup>53</sup> And this is pertinent given the rise of Incel ideology in North America, which signals that feminism still has much work to do to reverse the kind of thinking that would see women as sex slaves for these 'involuntary celibates', for instance. See, Simon Cottee, *Canada may Host the World's First Incel show Trial*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/01/canada-may-host-the-worlds-first-incele-show-trial/> (2020).

relations. These exist at the extreme end of the spectrum of gender relations, and it is precisely because of this sense of brokenness that they are primed for critical analysis. Wallace writes from within a U.S. specific, white, heterosexual matrix, to borrow from Judith Butler, and this is arguably a position of power and privilege, yet the manner in which this is presented throughout his fiction suggests a defectiveness inherent within the systems that construct the matrix: tales of severe addiction; self-harm; dysfunctional families, and relationships more widely; and a recurrent motif of the urge to dehumanize the other (Butler, *GT*, p. ix).

A look at the critical works from which this thesis takes inspiration helps to demonstrate this position in relation to existing Wallace scholars. The works of Mary K. Holland and Clare Hayes-Brady feature throughout the thesis, as much of their work is invested in discourse around issues of gender in Wallace's writing. Indeed, Holland's 'Mediated Immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*' (2013) sets out to explore the 'warped workings of relationships—largely male-female and primarily their linguistic workings'.<sup>54</sup> Many of the relationships that appear throughout Wallace's fiction can be viewed as being twisted in some manner. Holland continues by claiming that *Brief Interviews* is 'Wallace's only work to focus on the intersection between the problem of language and male-female relationships' (Holland, p. 107). While Holland is correct that the focus of the collection is predominantly in this area, this is a feature that is evident throughout the entirety of Wallace's fiction: via Lenore and Rick (*Broom*); Avril and Orin, Avril and Jim, Orin and Joelle, Joelle and Don (*Infinite Jest*); Lane and Sheri, Meredith and men in general (*The Pale King*). These are just some of the relationships that this thesis examines, and a defining feature of many of these is that for the most part they are neither healthy nor desirable. Again, it is this sense of brokenness that is important, and the fact that the bulk of Wallace's writing exists firmly within the heterosexual matrix, and that the domain within this matrix is viewed as warped, suggests a critique of Wallace's works just waiting to be examined further.

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<sup>54</sup> Mary K. Holland, 'Mediated Immediacy in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 107-130, (p. 107).

Similarly, the focus of Clare Hayes-Brady's "'...': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace' (2013) builds upon the work by Wallace scholars who 'lament the comparative absence of well-developed female characters', and thus sets out to explain this as a form of 'distancing' on Wallace's part.<sup>55</sup> Hayes-Brady commences by positing 'Wallace's women' as being based 'in alterity', and in doing so, furthers critical inquiry into this aspect of Wallace's writing (Hayes-Brady, p. 131). In particular, Hayes-Brady seeks to explore the 'power relationships [that exist] between masculinity and femininity', holding the two apart in order that femininity stands for the female experience, while masculinity stands for the male experience (Hayes-Brady, p. 132). A further example of this is Hayes-Brady's assertion that '[t]he absent female functions not in isolation, but in contrast, cooperation and combat with the present, active male', and that 'while an isolated reading of the feminine is dispiriting, it takes on a separate character when read against and alongside the masculine' (Hayes-Brady, 138). Taking inspiration from Hayes-Brady's approach, this thesis sets out to examine more closely those examples of female characters, questioning whether they can always and only be thought of in terms of femininity, and how this, then, may reshape readings of Wallace's women.

Elizabeth Freudenthal touches upon issues of gender in 'Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*' (2010).<sup>56</sup> Here, Freudenthal discusses how '[a] critique of the body makes room for a more coherent study of both femininity and masculinity', in relation to issues of compulsiveness, and later makes brief mention of Joelle van Dyne and Avril Incandenza (Freudenthal, p. 196). Of the two, Freudenthal suggests that it is 'Van Dyne's compulsiveness [which] thus enables an autonomy and sexuality outside normative heterosexuality, while Incandenza's creates the appearance of perfect maternal nurturing that conceals a self-interested abandonment of the patriarchal woman's role' (Freudenthal, p. 200). In fact, Freudenthal goes as far as to state that both characters 'operat[e] within, while also subverting, their

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<sup>55</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, "'...': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 131-150, (p. 131).

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Freudenthal, 'Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*', *New Literary History*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter, 2010), pp. 191-211.

female roles', and that it is Avril's 'ironic gender subversion' that is the cause of much discord between her and her sons (Freudenthal, p. 200). There is no further elaboration on these claims, and little to substantiate them in her discussion prior to this. This is frustrating in one sense because the claims she makes are fairly bold. However, frustration turns to opportunity because fully formed readings of Joelle's and Avril's respective subversion appear later in this thesis.

## 1.5 Methodology

This thesis considers relations between men and women, stemming from Holland's discussion of the same, and is primarily concerned with the dysfunctionality and discord that exists in Wallace's representation of those relationships, and the discourse around gender. These range from simple issues of miscommunication with no sense of malice or harm, through to the extreme end of the spectrum, where misogyny, objectification, rape, and sexual abuse, frequent tropes throughout the entirety of Wallace's *corpus*, speak to the very real harms of continuing dysfunctional practices. In addition, the questioning of masculinity and femininity, following on from Hayes-Brady's work around the same, is primarily concerned with Wallace's women, on whom too little is written, but also takes account of those men Wallace writes who are only ever discussed in terms of masculinity. Dysfunctionality and discord are figured through a questioning of the performativity of gender, as it appears in Wallace's works, and thus a brief understanding of the term itself is required. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler refutes certain essentialist notions of gender, instead placing great emphasis on the repetition of 'codes' and 'that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence' (p. 24). Butler continues: '[G]ender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. [...] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler, *GT*, p. 25). Effectively, there is no 'essence' of gender,

according to Butler, and this anti-essentialist position marks a turn in feminism at this time. Indeed, there are occasions throughout Wallace's *corpus* that suggest a hybrid form of gender at work, whereby masculinity and femininity are not constrained by sex, which speaks to this turn, and this problematizing of gender terms links with aspects of queer feminism. Most notably this occurs around the figure of Hugh/Helen Steeply in *Infinite Jest*, but there are many other subtle occurrences that inform this thesis.

Also critical for this thesis is the questioning of what is intelligible and what is not, in Wallace's works (in relation to the above). In a later text, Butler elaborates on the concerns raised in *Gender Trouble* around issues of gender by situating this in a discussion of the sexed body: '[T]he instability produced by the effort to fix the site of the sexed body challenges the boundaries of discursive intelligibility in each of these contexts. [...] [T]he point is to show that the uncontested status of "sex" within the heterosexual dyad secures the workings of certain symbolic orders, and that its contestation calls into question where and how the limits of symbolic intelligibility are set'.<sup>57</sup> Not content with disrupting the surety and fixity of gender classifications, Butler sets out to question the site of sex itself as potentially overtaken by gender: 'If gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not *accrue* social meanings as additive properties but, rather, is *replaced by* the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges [...] as the term which absorbs and displaces sex' (Butler *Bodies*, p. xv, emphasis original). Effectively, the intelligible (sex) becomes unintelligible in its desire to remain intelligible, precisely because a product of its own intelligible logic (gender) subsumes it. Again, this marks a departure from essentialist thought, and a new phase in feminist inquiry.

It is the birth of queer theory (another troubled term, like French feminism, in that it does not necessarily capture the diversity of those writing from within) that allows for expansions of thought that were previously repressed by some forms of feminism. Here, then, the opportunity exists to consider Wallace's works in light of this thinking, but by no means limited by it.

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<sup>57</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. xxiv.

J. Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) provides the theoretical springboard with which to consider Wallace's characters in new ways. Namely, that a loosening of masculinity and femininity enables a more nuanced discussion of both male and female characters. For instance, certain male characters are only ever referred to in terms of their masculinity, and often with an emphasis on a kind of hypermasculinity. The two most obvious examples of this are Orin Incandenza and Don Gately (*Infinite Jest*), where Orin's obsessive womanizing and Don's propensity for violence obscure from view the potential for a reading of aspects of their behaviour that speak to an affinity with femininity also. And equally, where Wallace's female characters are confined to discussions of their femininity, and thus a lack of agency, what possibilities exist when the likes of Lenore Bardsman (*Broom*), Joelle van Dyne and Avril Incandenza (*Infinite Jest*), and Toni Ware (*The Pale King*) cease to be viewed in such a limited manner, instead offering readings that note those moments in the texts where masculine traits are evident. This is not to substantiate that masculinity and femininity are merely inherent traits in humans after all, but rather that by demonstrating that Wallace's language positions the two in single subjects on a number of occasions, and throughout the entirety of his *corpus*, a new dimension of Wallace studies opens up to allow for a consideration of issues of gender that are rooted in queer theory.

Thinking, here, of the influence of television in a specifically U.S. context, and of Wallace's interest in this area, there is evidence that even mainstream audiences of the early 1990s are exposed to ideas and conversations that challenge essentialist notions of gender. This is vital to this thesis in terms of the importance of TV as a visual medium (a gaze) and the ways in which the gaze is gendered. For example, Marjorie Garber notes the popularity of talk shows on American television in the early 90s, and lists the kings and queens of daytime television as: Phil Donahue, Geraldo Rivera, Sally Jessy Raphael and Oprah Winfrey.<sup>58</sup> Garber also discusses that these talk shows develop a fascination with the subject of 'cross-dressing' and trans figures (RuPaul's popularity at its peak around this period), and that this reflects the merging of

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<sup>58</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 5.



both 'high culture and low', as academic discourse around issues of gender filter through to popular television shows, signalling academic works' interest in popular culture and that popular culture is an object of interrogation and a subject of theoretical work.<sup>59</sup> Wallace's essay, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' (1993), does exactly this, and Wallace directly references popular culture and the 'whole new marriage between high and low culture' that occurs following the post-war period, and here, makes brief mention of *Saturday Night Live* as a vehicle that 'specializes in parodies', which appears to be a type of humour Wallace appreciates.<sup>60</sup>

Halberstam blends high-culture academic theory with low-culture televisual references, and uses the *Saturday Night Live* skit 'It's Pat' to demonstrate 'conventional' society's reliance on gender classifications—exposing the ways in which 'people insist on attributing gender in terms of male or female on even the most undecidable characters' (Halberstam, p. 27). Halberstam's position is one that notes the comedic effect in Pat's regular 'sidestepping [of] gender fixity', before moving on to discuss the 'paucity of classifications' that exist for gender (Halberstam, p. 27). Conversely, in *Gender Outlaw* (1994), Kate Bornstein takes issue with Pat's character and the fact that such comedic elements stem from Pat's appearance as a 'slobbering, unattractive, simpering nerd' and that, in fact, 'It's Pat' is just the 'latest instalment in a sadly long tradition of comedy that objectifies, vilifies, and dehumanizes an otherwise voiceless minority'.<sup>61</sup> Here, the character of Hugh/Helen Steeply (*Infinite Jest*) springs to mind, whereby there is a case for castigating Wallace for his depiction of a man attempting to *pass* as a woman. However, when analysing the language around Hugh/Helen, and of the transition from Hugh to Helen as the text progresses, there exists the possibility that this is not merely another example of the tradition Bornstein alludes to. Yes, Hugh/Helen appears initially as a figure of fun, but a case can be made where all characters in *Infinite Jest* (and Wallace's wider fiction also) can be

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<sup>59</sup> Indeed, a trend with roots as far back as Roland Barthes' 1957 text, *Mythologies*. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. (New York: Jonathan Cape, 1972).

<sup>60</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and US fiction', in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): pp. 151-194, (pp. 162, 166).

<sup>61</sup> Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 130.

viewed in this manner—nobody escapes ridicule. Finding endless examples where mockery is utilized in Wallace's works, and noting the comic dimension to his writing generally, points to an effect of estrangement within such works—inviting the reader to pause over moments to consider how they work. Indeed, whether one finds fun in figures such as Pat or Hugh/Helen, or in those people who have difficulty reading instances of ambiguously gendered persons serves to reveal the constraints of essentialist views of gender and their prevalence in U.S. society.

A key figure of queer feminism whose works are important for the trajectory of this thesis is Judith Butler. Butler's theories problematize discussions around gender precisely because they refuse to align with essentialist thought. Instead, they offer scope to question the rigidity of the terms, masculinity and femininity, respectively. This is critical to a reading of Wallace's works in relation to queer theory because aspects of his writing appear to contrast with views of gender held by the likes of Irigaray, as residing as an essence of the male and the female experience. Butler states that it is the performativity of gender, the daily routines and codes that we enact in daily life, the ways in which even before birth we are separated into two distinct versions of gender, and that are so deeply-embedded that we rarely question them. This is what cultivates a gender hierarchy as it exists today in Western culture, where 'feminist appropriation of sexual difference, [...] attempts to theorize the feminine [...] as the unrepresentable absence effected by (masculine) denial that grounds the signifying economy through exclusion' (Butler, *GT*, p. 28). Effectively, certain strands of feminist discourse unwittingly contribute to this imbalance (think Kristeva's abhorrent mother). Whereas Butler's theories are almost exclusively confined to discussions around sexualities outside of the heterosexual matrix, this thesis uses those theories to develop a method of questioning the dysfunctionality of gender relations *within* the heterosexual matrix.

## 1.6 Wallace and Context: Heterosexualized U.S. Society

In a similar manner to the way in which Butler attempts to destabilize the apparent intelligibility that is inferred upon heterosexuality, queer feminist theory is utilized to disrupt and explicate areas of Wallace's *corpus* that are not easily explainable through terms that make use of fixed attributes of gender. For example, motifs of death and dying, or indeed the hopelessness insinuated in and around the recurrent theme of solipsism in Wallace's works aligns with Lee Edelman's polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).<sup>62</sup> Where Wallace frames the heterosexual matrix in terms of broken and dysfunctional relationships, this mirrors Edelman's attack on 'reproductive futurism, [...] an organizing principal of communal relations', where anything other than constant, uninterrupted child-rearing is rendered 'unthinkable' (Edelman, p. 2). Though Wallace's writing operates within the heterosexual matrix, the prevalent use of familial abuse, and of discord between adult partners, for example, provides a similar assault on the intelligibility of the heterosexual imperative to that of Edelman. As Lenore Beadsman Sr., Patrice Lavache Beadsman, and Jim Incandenza turn their backs on their children (one vanishes, one inclines to madness, and one commits suicide), and as Kate Gompert, Hal Incandenza, and Joelle van Dyne become slaves to their own solipsistic thoughts (and mental health issues), and as Avril Incandenza and Orin Incandenza focus solely on sexual pleasure rather than procreation, respectively, an unwitting antidote to reproductive futurism emerges.

Butler's theory on melancholia and its implied connection to gender also advances a more nuanced discussion of Wallace's characters, and provides links with texts that specifically engage with both feminist and queer politics. The sadness that Butler associates as stemming from assumed heterosexualized gender positions is situated in an unquestioning reliance on psychoanalytic conjecture, such as Freud's Oedipus complex. The resulting melancholia that the subject feels is not understood until, that is, a subject begins questioning their place in a gendered society.<sup>63</sup> Chu T'ien-Wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man* (1999),

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<sup>62</sup> Edelman, Lee, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>63</sup> More on this later, as Butler's theory is used to provide an alternative reading of Orin Incandenza's sadness. See, Judith Butler, 'Melancholy gender—refused Identification', in *Gender in Psychoanalytic Space: Between Clinic and Culture*, ed. by Muriel Dimen and Virginia Goldner (New York: Other Press, LLC, 2002), pp. 3-20.

Deborah Eisenberg's *Twilight of the Superheroes* (2006),<sup>64</sup> and James Robert Baker's *Tim and Pete* (1995), contrasting texts though they are, all utilize televisual imagery and dream-like sequences in their storytelling, and also pause around feelings of melancholia, demonstrating preoccupations similar to those of Wallace's fiction.<sup>65</sup>

Specifically setting out to make space for queer counter-cultures, Baker's text not only challenges the dominance of a homogenized, heterosexualized U.S. society, in the manner of Butler, but does so by exhibiting many of the hallmarks of Wallace's fiction: excessive violence; a preoccupation with males and acts of sexualized violence (implied or actual); a questioning of corporate culture; and language that evokes televisual and film imagery, to name but a few features. In terms of the visual, Donald M. Lowe focuses on 'technologies of the look [...] images and signs', in a discussion of the all-powerful tool of late capitalism.<sup>66</sup> Lowe attunes his argument to a 'culturally and historically specific, not universal' model: the West, and the 'Western hierarchy of sensing', and states that it is specifically the 'male gaze' and its visual 'subjugat[ion] and territorializ[ation]' that is at issue in masculinist 'twentieth-century visuality' (Lowe, p.132). This is the setting for much of Wallace's fiction, and a feature of his essay, 'E Unibus Pluram' (1993). Baker's text questions the dominance of the male gaze, in an age where the average American household watches over six hours of television per day, and there are similarities in the treatment of sexualized mother figures in his and Wallace's texts (Wallace, 'Unibus', p. 151).<sup>67</sup> Female characters are scant in *Tim and Pete* and it is Mrs Schindler, like

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<sup>64</sup> T'ien-Wen's protagonist meditates on the end of reproductive futurism, as technology is shown as a repeated distraction from life (p. 85). Later, he tells of waking up 'with laughter ringing in my ears, unable to tell where my dream world had gone. I seemed to be looking down at myself on the bed, drenched in cold sweat' (p. 96). The same cold sweat links with Orin Incandenza's regular night terrors, discussed in a later chapter. Similarly, Eisenberg's Lucien experiences difficulty in sleeping: '[a]ll night long he would struggle to throw it off, but when dawn delivered him to consciousness, he understood what it was, and that it would never go away' (p. 15). The repetition of something disturbing, and that one can never be free of is also remarkably analogous to Orin's experience upon waking.

<sup>65</sup> See, Chu T'ien Wen, *Notes of a Desolate Man*, trans. by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Deborah Eisenberg, *Twilight of the Superheroes: Stories* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2006); James R. Baker, *Tim and Pete: A Novel* (Manchester: Ringpull Press, 1995).

<sup>66</sup> Donald M. Lowe, *The Body in Late-Capitalist USA* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 132.

<sup>67</sup> Prime-time American television was found to display 'an average of 27 [heterosexual sexual references] an hour', while there were 'between one and two references each to sexual intercourse and to "deviant or discouraged sexual practices"', which enforces the ascendancy of the heterosexual matrix in popular culture (Lowe, *The Body*, p. 151).

*Infinite Jest's* Avril Incandenza, who inspires disgust in her son.<sup>68</sup> The use of popular culture references in *Tim and Pete* accentuates the tradition of masculinist twentieth-century visuality that Lowe theorizes.

In 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young' (1988), Wallace posits the impact that television has on its consumers, where viewers are irrevocably changed in the process of trying to understand their place in the systems they witness each day in untold televisual dramas.<sup>69</sup> He discusses the new generation of writers (David Leavitt; Jay McInerney; and Bret Easton Ellis) whose writing is directly engaged with the fact that television, for anyone born in the U.S. from the late 50s onwards, is not so much entertainment as it is lifestyle, and that a good number of viewers struggle to comprehend the distinctions between the lives they live and the lives they watch on the small screen (Wallace, 'Futures', p.40). And equally, Wallace notes the lessening of the gap that used to allow scholars to distinguish between 'high and low culture', which necessarily depends on making distinctions between what is 'good' and 'bad' art (Wallace, 'Futures', p.40). Later in the essay, Wallace notes the demise of another fallacy—that literary language is no longer able to pass itself off as unbiased in the age of television:

Crudely put, the idea that literary language is any kind of neutral medium [...], or that it's any kind of inert tool lying there passively to be well- or ill-used by a communicator of meaning, has been cast into rich and serious question. With it, too, the stubborn Romanticist view of fiction as essentially a mirror, [...]. Language's promotion from mirror to eye, from *organikos* to organic, is yesterday's news (except in those two lonely outposts, TV and the Creative classroom) as the tide of Post-Structuralism, Marxism, Feminism, Freudianism, Deconstruction, Semiotics, Hermeneutics, and attendant -isms and -ics moves through the

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<sup>68</sup> Early on in the text there is a moment of consensual sex framed as a symbolic rape scene involving Pete's 'mom' at her place of work 'in a mini-mall set in an empty parking lot' (p. 39). Mrs Schindler receives a tirade of abuse from her son as he enters the scene, but this is merely another example, like that of Avril Incandenza, where mothers are vilified for their sexuality—Sedgwick's 'double binds' are in evidence. Here, a link with Sedgwick's theory of a 'male homosocial continuum' is evident, where Sedgwick stresses that *all* men are said to maintain a dominant position over women. See, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 19-20. This work is not without controversy, as Sedgwick is accused of homophobia by at least one critic. David Van Leer states that Sedgwick does 'not uncover a homophobic thematic but underwrites one' in, 'The Beast of the Closet: Homosexuality and the Pathology of Manhood', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Spring: 1989), pp. 587-605, (p. 605). Sedgwick offers a frank rebuttal of Van Leer's slur in, 'Tide and Trust', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Summer: 1989), pp. 745-757.

<sup>69</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 8.3 (1988), 36-53, (p. 43).

(“Straight”) U.S. academy and into the consciousness of the conscious American adult (Wallace, ‘Futures’, p.50).

Wallace emphasizes the neutrality of literary language, yet many of his works are provocative precisely because they use literary language to challenge axiomatic thought. And here, the once exclusive realms of the academy are now readily accessible to those U.S. citizens willing to pay attention to the society around them, according to Wallace. Yet it is curious the way Wallace frames this as occurring through the ‘straight’ (or heterosexualized) academy, which hints that Wallace is aware of the growing queer movement within. In the course of the essay Wallace situates himself as part of the ‘conspicuously young’ writers, yet sets himself apart from them, while also taking care to distance himself from his predecessors: ‘We, the would-be heirs to a gorgeous chaos, stand witness to the rise and fall of the *nouveau roman*, Postmodernism, Metafiction, The New Lyricism, The New Realism, Minimalism, Ultraminimalism, Performance-Theory’ (Wallace, ‘Futures’, p.51). With the apparent decline of these literary methods a space opens for Wallace to forge a literary path all his own.

Here, then, at the very beginning of Wallace’s writing career, there is a sign that the changes happening within the academy and the effects on the wider heterosexualized U.S. society are of great influence and concern to his project. This Introduction demonstrates Wallace’s familiarity with feminism as a movement, and his so-called admiration of the works of the French feminists (stemming from his interest in Derrida’s essays). It also notes the effect of Eve Sedgwick’s arrival at Amherst in 1984, and the advent of queer theory that this heralds, and the subsequent changes to gender discourse that occur as a result. The tension that exists between these theoretical positions is also noted for its effect on Wallace’s wider *corpus*, and this is explored in detail throughout the thesis. Gender, as a theoretical concern made prominent in the wider U.S. culture through feminist discourse is now open to debate, and this is evident in Wallace’s characters and also in a good number of his essays.

## 2. PROBLEMATIZING SYSTEMS of GENDER

This chapter notes the ways in which Wallace's early works of fiction present instances of the very cultural shift that Sedgwick articulates in her Amherst talk, charting the beginning of Wallace's engagement with gender discourse that will continue throughout his writing career. In doing so, this furthers the argument set up in the Introduction that aspects of Wallace's works exhibit more of a commonality with queer theory than with the essentialists of French feminism, and that his works are so challenging precisely because they offer conflicting viewpoints for critics to focus upon. An example of this comes with Jackson's claim that 'Wallace uses neoliberal logics to present male sexuality as being immutably toxic', and that this should be of no surprise to us due to 'Wallace's abusive personal behaviour' towards women (Jackson, pp. 2-3). Jackson's focus on the toxic nature of male sexuality, as presented in Wallace's fiction, is both astute and necessary. Yet it is not the only form of sexuality, male or otherwise, on display, for at times Wallace's texts also exhibit a distinct lack of concern with sexuality—more on this as the chapter progresses. Beginning with a sustained analysis of Wallace's debut novel, *The Broom of the System* (1986), the chapter then moves to consider aspects of his collection of short stories, *Girl*

with *Curious Hair* (1989), in order to coincide with current criticism that continues to focus on more nuanced aspects of his *oeuvre*.

<sup>1</sup> The reason for this is to provide ways in which Wallace's works can be read against the grain, highlighting those areas of his works that do not fit readily with the stereotypical image of a straight, white, male author.

Indeed, following on from the Introduction discussion of the cultural conditions in which Wallace begins his writing career, a sustained level of gender discourse is seen during the opening chapter of his debut novel, *Broom*. This is most evident in Wallace's choice of a female protagonist to drive the narrative and its interrogation of philosophical skepticism, forming a strategy with which to highlight societal use of language around gender relations in particular. Equally unconventional is Wallace's opening to the *Girl with Curious Hair* collection of stories. In 'Little Expressionless Animals' Wallace provides for the reader an example of female homosexuality that demonstrates tenderness and companionship, without straying into areas of lesbian sexuality (though later in the collection the treatment of male homosexuality is less sympathetic). Notably, Wallace's use of campus rape, as a topic that dominates the opening of *Broom*, reflects the changing dynamics of gender discourse that are forming in the mid-1980s through the work of figures such as Eve Sedgwick, for example. Sedgwick's arrival on a campus rife with misogyny (as depicted in her 'Sabrina' talk) mimics precisely the setting of Wallace's debut novel. I assert that *Broom* acts as a vehicle to explore and disrupt gender axioms, which follow on from the discussion of Sedgwick's impact upon arrival at Amherst in the Introduction. The novel's title speaks to this in its use of a phrase attributed to Wittgenstein. When discussing the 'broom' are we to think of both the broomstick *and* the brush as a harmonious 'system', or as two separate and distinct parts that make up the system? Immediately, the choice of title lends itself to critical enquiry. To demonstrate this it is vital to conduct a close reading of the opening chapter, and to pause over those moments in the text that for too long receive little response from critics. The first issue to attend to is that of campus rape and its place in feminist and gender discourse, where patterns of gendered behaviour

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 2011); David Foster Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Hachette, 2014).



are recognizable and thus open to questioning, rather than the acceptance of them as societal practices unlikely to change.

However, prior to this some thought must be given to Wallace's own actions around women, where instances of abusive, even stalker-like behaviour has come to public attention. As noted in the Introduction, Hungerford takes the approach of refusing to teach or read Wallace because of this, which is perfectly understandable given Mary Karr's experience of having Wallace obsess over her to the point where he considered killing her husband (Max, *A Life of*, pp. 162-70). Hungerford deploys the term 'audience pussy' early on in the chapter in which she denounces Wallace and his works (Hungerford, p. 141). Hungerford correctly asserts that this 'was his friend and sometime lover Mary Karr's term for the hookups that Wallace's *Infinite Jest* book tour made possible', and so it is clear that this is not a term used by Wallace, but by Karr (Hungerford, p. 141). However, Wallace's behaviour, not only with Karr, is extremely troubling—the Max biography even notes an occasion where Wallace is alleged to have had sex with an 'underaged' girl (Max, *A Life of*, p. 232). If true, this action alone makes Wallace guilty of statutory rape, which further complicates an attempt at reading Wallace as a writer who actively engages with feminist concerns. However, the aim of this thesis is to deal with aspects of Wallace's texts that require, and are starting to elicit more nuanced readings precisely because they do not fit with the image of Wallace the abuser and statutory rapist, and which speak of a mind attempting to understand the most negative aspects of gender relations (rape and sexual abuse feature prevalently, here). A most recent work by eminent Wallace critic Marshall Boswell devotes an entire chapter to what Boswell terms 'Wallace snark'.<sup>2</sup> Here, Boswell confronts, at times problematically, the current tendency that exists in 'literary blogs written by women' (Hungerford included) of expressing resentment towards Wallace and his writing (Boswell, *Effect*, p. 125). This resentment, as Boswell views it, has the potential to be critically fruitful if it forces Wallace readers to confront difficult topics such as sexual abuse, rape, and the dysfunctionality that exists in

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<sup>2</sup> Marshall Boswell, *The Wallace Effect: David Foster Wallace and the Contemporary Literary Imagination* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2019), p. 125.

relationships, the majority of which are firmly housed within the heterosexual matrix and thus invite readings from outside of that setting.

The opening chapter of *Broom* reflects the tensions that are forming in mid-1980's America, with respect to gender relations at the extreme end of the spectrum. In this respect, Lenore Beadsman Jr. is central to the text's aims not only because of her place within the system and the effect she has on those around her, but precisely because she does not conform to simple notions of femininity. Lenore's grandmother, Lenore Sr. (a student of Wittgenstein), offers opportunity for the reader to question the use of language, both because of her absence from the text and because of Lenore's feelings of uncertainty over her own existence. Critical to this line of thought is that Lenore and her journey through the system provide more evidence that Wallace's project does not solely rely upon the French feminists' certainty of what it means to be a woman. Rather, Lenore problematizes such notions and in this sense shows more of an affinity to the queer feminist thinking that is beginning to impact upon U.S. culture in the mid-late 1980s, as Eve Sedgwick's arrival at Amherst demonstrates. This is made explicit in the opening pages, where Lenore, only fifteen years old and on the cusp of adulthood, is already thinking about her college application and thus stands apart (both literally and metaphorically) from the other girls she meets at her sister's college dormitory. The characters move from seemingly idle chitchat to discussing the prevalence of campus rape, before the tone darkens further with the arrival of two 'frat boys' who pose a threat of sexual harassment, intimidation, and violence. Once more, there is a link with Sedgwick's arrival at Amherst, and of her 'Sabrina' talk on the extensive misogyny at the college. Unfortunately, Sedgwick's intervention does not appear to herald wider changes in attitudes or in practice, for campus rape across the U.S. continues to be a topic of concern to this day.

## 2.1 Campus Rape

Undoubtedly, this confirms that gender relations at the extreme end of the spectrum continue to cause harm and fear for many women on campuses. The

recent case of Kelly Yang, a Harvard Law School graduate threatened with the removal of her degree as a by-product of speaking out publicly about the sexual assault she survived, is only one in a chain of countless cases.<sup>3</sup> Yang details the processes involved in reporting a sexual assault on campus, where those filing complaints face a ‘mini-court system’ (not part of the wider U.S. legal system) and must prove that a crime took place against them—effectively, proving oneself ‘not guilty’ of false reporting (Yang, *Harvard*, Web). The onus appears to be on the survivor of assaults to lead prosecutions and to defend their own accounts of sexual assault and rape, as if colleges prefer not to have to bother with these issues.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the threat to Yang of the removal of her degree, along with ‘Harvard Law School requir[ing Yang] to write and sign a document saying [she] would not bring a criminal complaint with the police’ (Yang, *Harvard*, Web). Wallace’s text notes a similar attitude in its discussion of campus rape:

“This happen a lot?”

“What happen?”

“Rapes and assaults and stuff?”

Clarice and Sue look away, all calm. “Sometimes, probably, who knows, it’s hard to say, because it gets covered up or not reported or something a lot of the time, the College isn’t exactly nuts about—” (p. 9).

The trailing off of speech leaves it to the reader to decide the ending to this sentence. It also signals Lenore Beadsman’s shock at hearing such news, as she interrupts her older sister, Clarice:

“Well how many times that you know of?”

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<sup>3</sup> See Kelly Yang, *Harvard Law School Came After Me for Speaking Up about My Sexual Assault*, <https://medium.com/@kellyyangauthor/harvard-law-school-came-after-me-for-speaking-up-about-my-sexual-assault-779a27fd0195> (2020). See also; Marisa Lati, *Her Name is Chanel Miller, Not 'Unconscious Intoxicated Woman' in Stanford Assault Case*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/09/05/her-name-is-chanel-miller-not-unconscious-intoxicated-woman-stanford-assault-case/> (2019); and Jia Tolentino, *Is there a Smarter Way to Think about Sexual Assault on Campus?* <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/12/is-there-a-smarter-way-to-think-about-sexual-assault-on-campus> (2018). These are just a few articles that deal with just some of the reported sexual assaults and rapes occurring on U.S. campuses.

<sup>4</sup> See Angie Epifano, *An Account of Sexual Assault at Amherst College*, <https://amherststudent.amherst.edu/article/2012/10/17/account-sexual-assault-amherst-college.html> (2018). <[https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/letters\\_president/node/436469](https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/letters_president/node/436469)>. Here, Angie Epifano details not only her own rape while at Amherst, but also the appalling treatment she suffers from the college administration following the attack. Epifano’s allegation is that rapists’ stories are believed ahead of those surviving rape and sexual assault, and that rape survivors are left feeling unsafe and subject to treatment that feels like punishment for speaking out against their attackers. Also noteworthy are the comments at the foot of the article, which indicate that misogyny is still rife at Amherst. The secondary URL is the college President’s response to Epifano’s article.

"Idle know. About maybe, I guess I know of about ten women—"

"Ten!"

"...."

"How many women do you even know total, here?"

"Lenore, *I* don't know," Clarice says. "It's just not... it's just common sense, is what it is, really. If you're careful, you know, and stay off the paths at night..." (p. 9, emphasis original).

There is clear discomfort in discussing the topic, evidenced in Clarice's hesitation in divulging statistics to Lenore. Lenore's naivety, in being the only person in the room unaware that sexual assault and rape are the fixed realities of women's life (once more, emphasizing her stance apart from the other girls), signals a wider incredulity that this is the situation for women on campus.

Here, then, the chapter is unusual given the way that two of Wallace's contemporaries treat issues of rape in their debut novels. Jonathan Franzen's *The Twenty-Seventh City* offers the viewpoint that the white suburban wife is safe within the confines of her own domestic boundaries (kitchen, and/or country club), but that stepping out into spaces populated by society's lower-classes results either in being mistaken for a prostitute, or encountering countless men who threaten rape at every turn.<sup>5</sup> Bret Easton Ellis' debut, *Less than Zero*, offers an equally bleak perspective on the cultural prevalence of rape, but is far more graphic in its depiction.<sup>6</sup> The text references a 'snuff' film, where a fifteen-year-old girl and sixteen-year-old boy are tied, raped, and then mutilated and killed (Ellis, p.142). Later, the story of Shandra, a twelve-year-old girl who is permanently tied to a bed, injected with drugs, and gang-raped appears just before an image of a girl who is also gang-raped, has her breasts cut off, and is left to bleed to death hanging inverted from a children's swing set (Ellis, p.175-78). Though Ellis' use of rape is used for shock value, arguably, again there is nothing to suggest that this is anything other than confirming what appears to be the fixed reality of rape for women in society. The moral of both stories appears as a combination of: do not stray too far from home; do not

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Franzen, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (London and New York: Fourth Estate, 2003), pp. 489-93, 496-98. The threat as posed here for Barbara Probst is that of a fixed reality, and there is no meaningful interaction with the topic from Franzen. It merely serves the function of reminding a woman of the fear that exists in stepping out alone onto the streets of a U.S. city, for there is no attempt at questioning the cultural existence of rape as a weapon.

<sup>6</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero* (London: Picador, 2010).

take drugs or consume too much alcohol; do not walk in certain areas or at certain times of the day; and do not put yourself in 'harm's way'. Rape and sexual assault, as depicted here and elsewhere, serve as controlling elements. Fear is used to instil the notion that a woman must always be aware of the choices made in order to avoid rape and sexual assault—Clarice's 'common sense' analogy. Sedgwick sums this up in her thoughts on a woman's sexuality: 'Be sexual—dress up; look as if you're on the sexual market or else you're a man hater. On the other hand, don't be *too* sexual because then you're asking for it' (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 15, emphasis original). Sedgwick articulates the real lack of freedom in women's sexuality, and the fear that accompanies this.

The opening sentence of the novel does little to convey that a most serious topic is imminent: 'Most really pretty girls have pretty ugly feet, and so does Mindy Metalman, Lenore notices, all of a sudden' (p. 3). Indeed, a further generalisation is found a few paragraphs on, which states that Lenore is able to 'divide all the girls she's known neatly into girls who think deep down they're pretty and girls who deep down think they're really not' (p. 4). Here, a reader may be forgiven for thinking that this is familiar territory with respect to the way a male author treats female characters in fiction, in that it implies that girls are straightforward, predictable, and incapable of meaningful thought, or that girls must maintain an interest in matters of prettiness because this is a factor that defines their lives. However, when the reader remains attuned to the fact that it is Lenore's point of view which influences the whole of the chapter, and much of the novel thereafter, a more nuanced reading is possible—Lenore's perspective frames the narrative through her eyes. The decision to situate the girls in a dormitory at Mount Holyoke (Amherst's all-girl sister college, and Amy Wallace's *alma mater*), and then to factor in the influence of Amherst 'frat boys' (an all-boy college at the time of the novel's initial setting: 1981) points directly to the rapid change higher education is about to undergo during this period. Marshall Boswell makes brief reference to the 'frat boys' interjection, stating that their behaviour amounts to positioning the girls as 'objects of the males' control but also as the recipients of their excrement' (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 43). Their entrance into the girls' dormitory is certainly not welcome, nor does it present a positive picture of a co-ed system. Here, there is moment to pause

and to consider the implication of such an approach, especially when holding in mind Ellis' and Franzen's debuts, respectively.

As for Lenore's inclusion in the text, she does not appear to be overly sexualized in her role as Wallace's protagonist, and nor is she subjected to scrutiny with respect to her outward appearance—the gaze, male or otherwise, does not impact upon her in any measurable way. In fact, she appears as rather an unremarkable protagonist, and in many ways is not unlike Hal Incandenza in this sense (Wallace's protagonist in *Infinite Jest*). However, what is notable about Lenore is the extent to which her philosophical skepticism influences the narrative, which is the focus of the latter part of this chapter. In much the same manner as that of Siri Hustvedt's protagonist, Iris (*The Blindfold*), Lenore challenges perceptions of what it means to be alive in the modern age.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the journey that Lenore undertakes during the course of the novel, both literal and metaphorical, indicates that this is a key chapter in the formation of ideas that will continue to repeat as themes of abuse and toxic relations throughout the remainder of Wallace's fiction. Here, Lenore acts as a guide through the text (and later as a witness to the socio-sexual systems of the time), reminding readers of their own place in language systems and of the possibilities that arise from being human and able, therefore, to question the otherwise unquestionable—those axioms that Sedgwick so helpfully sets out, for instance.

Returning to consider the opening remarks from Wallace's novel, there is room to misread the discourse on display between the college girls on notions and levels of 'prettiness', as offering a predictable, even pseudo-feminist method for interpreting the scene. Such a reading may even suggest that Wallace's text promotes a tepid, but no less toxic form of misogyny, via Lenore; or, in fact, that the text merely dispenses with stereotypical axioms that a reader expects to find in a scene where only teenage girls populate the dormitory. Do such apparent truisms serve to render the opening chapter unworthy of critical attention? Perhaps they cloud the judgement of Wallace critics, leading them to overlook the particular example of gender discourse that occurs around the issue of campus rape. Boswell takes an approach with

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<sup>7</sup> A discussion of Siri Hustvedt's text appears in the chapter on Wallace's book reviews. Siri Hustvedt, *The Blindfold: A Novel* (London: Macmillan, 2003).

*Broom* of noting the way in which Wallace ‘broadens [the] objectification motif to encompass a large-scale feminist critique of literary misogyny’, and conducts a considered reading of the relationships Lenore has with Rick and Lang, while sidestepping the opening chapter, largely (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 41). Indeed, Daniela Franca Joffe, in one of the most fully considered pieces of critical work in this area contends that the opening chapter of *Broom* is ‘so anomalous against strictly theoretical interpretations of the novel that it is often simply ignored altogether’.<sup>8</sup> Joffe notes that in it, Lenore ‘distinguish[es] herself from the older, more desensitized group of college women through her reaction to the topic of campus rape’, and it is the presence of a ‘deadening’ of sensibility that is key, here (Joffe, p.154). Lenore is not yet worn down by the system that sees rape and sexual assault as the fixed reality of women’s lives, and so her naivety in this sense allows for readers to re-evaluate their own participation in a system that operates at the time with curriculums that exhibit a real lack of women’s experience and ‘gender perspective’, as Sedgwick posits.

Initially, the reader is informed that there are ‘girls like Lenore, who don’t think they’re too pretty, tend not to wear makeup, and run track, and wear black Converse sneakers, and keep their bathrobes pretty well fastened at all times’ (p. 4). Again, from this description Lenore appears unexceptional, and she is not portrayed as overtly sexualized. Furthermore, from the lack of cosmetics, her choice of sport, and footwear, there is occasion to see Lenore as less feminine and more masculine in her choices—even occupying the space of ‘tomboy’. J. Jack Halberstam describes ‘tomboyism’ as that which ‘tends to be associated with a “natural” desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys’.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, at this stage there is little to hold Lenore back from her ambitions, and she is around three years ahead of most other college applicants who will only begin applying as they near eighteen years old. Halberstam notes the difference that adolescence brings for boys in that it ‘represents a rites of passage, and an ascension to some version of social power’, whereas for girls it is ‘a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression’, and that ‘female adolescence’ is where ‘tomboy instincts [...] are remodelled

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<sup>8</sup> Daniela F. Joffe, “‘The Last Word’: Sex-Changes and Second-Wave Feminism in *the Broom of the System*”, *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, 1 (2018), 151-184, (p. 153).

<sup>9</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 6.

into compliant forms of femininity' (p. 6). Halberstam's hypothesis has the opportunity to be put to the test in *Broom's* opening chapter because the above scenario is played out in a disturbing manner. Equally, the arc of the narrative, here, allows for a consideration of Lenore's female masculinity to be thought of as 'a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach' (Halberstam, p. 9). This manner of reading Lenore fits with what a reader sees of her at the book's opening and throughout, and provides a blueprint for more of Wallace's fictional women.

Moving ahead in the novel, Lenore appears to represent the 'slacker-generation'. She is a young woman who despite belonging to a wealthy family and being in a position where she could live a rather uncomplicated life, due to her class status, instead chooses to work in an entry-level job as a telephonist. It is this decision of Lenore's that sees her struggle through life, work and most other events—judging by her need for counselling at the relatively young age of twenty-four years old, which speaks of the maladjustment that Halberstam posits. At first meeting, Lenore does not seem at all notable and her progression through the narrative does not bring her any sort of catharsis. Indeed, Clare Hayes-Brady argues that by the end of the novel Lenore is much more confused and may even have less 'agency' than when we are introduced to her at the novel's opening.<sup>10</sup> However, there is more to Lenore than the opening description of her reveals and by paying close attention to Lenore's role as protagonist, and the ways in which Wallace presents gender relations at the extreme end of the spectrum in the opening chapter, via the issue of campus rape, the careful reader may avoid overly stereotyping this young, privileged woman. Yes, Lenore adopts the role of 'slacker', shares her hypotheses about 'pretty girls', wears Converse sneakers religiously, has issues with hygiene (according to her psychiatrist), and seems to move from one ill-judged relationship to the next. However, in Wallace's Lenore I suggest there is a more dynamic portrayal of a young woman approaching the latter end of the twentieth century.

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<sup>10</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, "'...': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 131-150, (p. 135).



Indeed, at the age of fifteen, Lenore is mature enough to socialise with her older sister's college friends (all of whom must be over eighteen years old). She even supplies the 'weed' that facilitates the 'pot-head/stoner' conversation that takes place during the opening chapter—although it must be noted that Lenore does not smoke pot at this point due to it being 'track season' (p. 4).<sup>11</sup> This is of particular interest with respect to the third person narration that is influenced by the free indirect discourse of Lenore's point of view. It is evident that Lenore is intelligent, mature for her age, and that she has a clear head where the other room occupants do not—and this indicates that she is a reliable source, as far as the narrative is concerned, because as far as is known she is not under the influence of drugs. Again, this information sets Lenore apart from the other girls in the room. During the course of Lenore's 'pretty girls' hypotheses, her point of view fixes on Mindy Metalman,<sup>12</sup> the 'Playboy-Playmatish JAP from Scarsdale' (p. 6).<sup>13</sup> The narrative treatment of Mindy is a stereotypical representation of a 'wannabe Playmate' when considering the way that Lenore's eyes wander across Mindy's body on a number of occasions. This has the effect of titillating the reader with descriptions of the view beneath Mindy's bathrobe. However, viewing the treatment of Mindy as a stereotypical depiction of a young, attractive woman only applies if a reader is familiar with knowledge of matters external to the narrative: the author is a man; readers of Wallace's works are often referred to as 'LitBros' (young, affluent, white men such as Wallace);<sup>14</sup> and Wallace's experience of life in an all-girls college dormitory is likely to be limited, at best, and thus, a specifically male perspective of what girls do in such spaces can be inferred.

Approaching the narrative without prior knowledge of the author, and without such assumptions as are made above, a possible explanation of events is that Lenore casts her eye over Mindy's body by way of comparing her own

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<sup>11</sup> And here, there is a further link with Hal Incandenza, another known user of 'pot'.

<sup>12</sup> Anon., *Platinum (New Earth)*, [https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Platinum\\_\(New\\_Earth\)](https://dc.fandom.com/wiki/Platinum_(New_Earth)). Perhaps an allusion to Platinum Metal Man (a.k.a. Tina), from *Metal Men Comics* (1962-), a robot super-hero made from metal that believes she is human, and as such, falls in love with her creator.

<sup>13</sup> J.A.P. being an acronym of Jewish American Princess, a slur that is not quite, but almost the female form of W.A.S.P., a slur much used by Wallace in his essays and fiction (and even a term he uses to refer to himself on occasion—and the Sedgwick uses in her 'Sabrina' talk).

<sup>14</sup> Molly Fischer, *Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace*, <https://www.thecut.com/2015/08/david-foster-wallace-beloved-author-of-bros.html> (2015).

body, something that is reasonable for an adolescent to have occasion to do when socialising with peers (whether man or woman). For instance, the first glance across at Mindy following the revelation of Mindy's 'ugly feet' is one that causes Lenore to recognize that Mindy's cleavage is 'a lot more than Lenore's got', which once more fits with the more masculine body image of the tomboy (p. 3). However, the next moment of voyeurism sounds decidedly stereotypical, even sexualized, as Lenore's point of view informs the reader that 'a wisp of dark shiny hair has slithered out of a crack in the folds [of a towel] and curled down all demurely past the side of Mindy's face and under her chin', as if the hair has a life of its own (p. 3). Judging what is, and what is not stereotypical treatment of the college girls in the dormitory will always remain an issue of subjectivity, which more likely informs of a critic's own stance rather than that of the subject at hand. Here, as Cat Stevens provides the soundtrack to the pot-head/stoner conversation that takes place between the girls, and as they repeatedly reapply the needle to the beginning of the vinyl disc the focus of the chapter shifts to consider the inclusion of campus rape—a significant topic for inclusion in Wallace's debut novel's opening chapter.

The topic arises from a conversation that concerns two other students at Mount Holyoke. Nancy Splittstoesser and Pat Proctor are two characters we may consider as 'archetypal' in their use, for they do not influence the text directly and the reader only hears of their story through Sue Shaw's, Mindy's, and Clarice's retelling of events on the morning of Lenore's visit. Mindy is in a reclined position on the floor of the room, and her wandering bathrobe moves Clarice to request Mindy to, "fix your robe or get dressed or get up off your back in Lenore's stuff, I'm not really into giving you a gynecological exam, which is sort of what you're making us do, here, O Lesbia of Thebes" (p. 6). The somewhat juvenile 'lesbian' reference animates Sue Shaw into gossiping about Nancy and Pat, and their co-habitation and tendency to wash together "in the same *shower*" (p. 7, emphasis original). Through the exchange that follows between Sue, Clarice, Lenore, and Mindy, the reader learns that Nancy is a 'pretty' lesbian and that Pat is a 'bull' (bull-dyke, masculine, butch). Also commented upon is the fact that Nancy is presently engaged to a young man and that her relationship with Pat came about following an incident on campus

where she was sexually assaulted and/or raped, for the exact details are not clear (p. 8).<sup>15</sup> The girls' hypothesis with respect to Nancy is that the incident temporarily "messed her up" and that she is "pretty confused" by it, and that she may not "like males now" because of the attack (p. 8). In itself, this is a fairly crass and juvenile assumption, which indicates that Wallace's engagement with feminist discourse contains flaws at this stage of his career. Once more, Sedgwick's Amherst talk sets out such a position: 'If you're a woman and you're a feminist, or becoming a feminist, there's always that sword hanging over your head of being called a lesbian' (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 14). Similarly, Judith Butler frames this as the kind of logic that views lesbians as something 'acquired by virtue of some failure in the heterosexual machinery', as if the act of rape or sexual assault is the cause of lesbianism in this instance—thus continuing to privilege the heterosexual matrix above all other expressions of sexuality.<sup>16</sup> Equally, Halberstam notes that 'within a lesbian context, female masculinity [is] the place where patriarchy goes to work on the female psyche and reproduces misogyny within femaleness', as indicated by the way the girls 'gossip' about Pat and Nancy even after an attack that should inspire solidarity amongst the students (Halberstam, p. 9).

As noted earlier, there follows a discussion about the prevalence of sexual assault and rape on campus, and Lenore expresses concern at the frequency of such events and at the attitudes of the older girls who view such things as being the 'norm'. Here, Clarice imparts the following advice to her younger sister on how to avoid rape and sexual assault: "[I]t's just common sense, is what it is, really. If you're careful, you know, and stay off the paths at night..." (p. 9). Problematically, and controversially, Clarice's warning shifts the responsibility of avoiding 'it' (the sexual violence and rape that she refuses to name here and throughout) onto the young women on campus, as if they are in some way complicit when such acts occur.<sup>17</sup> Ominously, after they spend a little more time discussing the subject of campus rape there comes '[a] scritch. The

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<sup>15</sup> The way Clarice retells the events to Lenore is ambiguous as to the actual details of the assault that Nancy survives.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 86-7.

<sup>17</sup> Clarice's thoughts, here, will receive more attention later in the chapter. There is also a similar, equally disturbing view to be found in #BI 20 from *Brief Interviews* (see *Brief Interviews* chapter).

Cat Stevens goes off all of a sudden, in the main room. There's loud knocking on the front door' (p. 12). Sue Shaw opens the door and finds two young men who should not have made it past the security guards, the many locked doors, and into the area of the building that houses the all-girl dormitories. A hint of intimidation and threat is rife as Andy 'Wang-Dang' Lang (Andrew Sealander) 'not very subtly pushes the door open with one big hand, and Sue goes back a little on her heels, and the two [Lang and Bernard Werner 'Biff' Diggerence] just walk right in, all of a sudden' (p. 12).<sup>18</sup> The Amherst 'frat' boys are under the influence of alcohol as they enter the room, and they ignore repeated requests from the girls to leave the dormitory immediately.<sup>19</sup> This 'rites of passage' for the boys confirms Halberstam's thoughts on adolescence for girls as representing a form of 'repression'.

Of particular interest, is the flaw in logic that is evident leading up to the frat boys' entrance. Again, returning to the passage where Clarice ascribes blame to those persons who 'fall prey' to sexual assault and rape, she spouts the kind of rhetoric that may sound like 'common sense' at first hearing. However, on closer inspection Clarice's choice of words has a pernicious element at its core: "...it's just common sense, is what it is, really. If you're careful, you know, and stay off the paths at night..." (p. 9). What Clarice is actually saying is that to be sexually assaulted or raped shows a distinct lack of care and common sense. Clarice's 'logic' does not connect with feminist discourse, and even reflects misinformed views on the subject, confirming Halberstam's view that the female psyche adopts its own form of misogyny through cultural means.<sup>20</sup> Clarice and the older girls adopt an approach where part of the blame for sexual assault and rape lies with the person who is assaulted and/or raped (the victim or survivor). This is where Lenore's importance to the text becomes clear, and once more sets her apart from the other girls in the room. Clarice's views on

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<sup>18</sup> Lang is possibly a reference to R. D. Laing, the psychiatrist Wallace mentions in his review of Kathy Acker's works (see non-fiction chapters), who challenged established practices around mental illness.

<sup>19</sup> Given their unusual names, Wang-Dang Lang and Biff may well represent parodic figures of sexual aggression, made even more plausible when Lang tells the girls he was sent by an alleged mutual acquaintance, Doug Dangler (p. 13).

<sup>20</sup> Once more, see the comments attached at the foot of Angie Epifano's article, where respondents talk about the need for women not to drink alcohol excessively, or to wear 'revealing' clothes, or to specify their feelings around consent early on, as if women must take responsibility for being raped, See Angie Epifano, *An Account of Sexual Assault at Amherst College*, <https://amherststudent.amherst.edu/article/2012/10/17/account-sexual-assault-amherst-college.html> (2018). <[https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/letters\\_president/node/436469](https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/letters_president/node/436469)>.

personal safety contrast sharply with Lenore's reaction at hearing the news of Nancy's assault, and of the prevalence of rape on campus. This raises interesting questions of what is to follow now that the frat boys enter the girls' room—against their express wishes. The very fact that the boys compromise the girls' privacy, through a show of brute force, arrogance, and a warped sense of entitlement, contradicts Clarice's earlier hypothesis of how best to avoid sexual assault and rape.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, if it transpires that Lang and Biff have intentions of sexually assaulting or raping the girls, then the care and common sense shown by the girls, of staying in their security guard protected room in an all-girl dormitory affords them little in the way of protection from such acts; in fact, it raises the question of just how Clarice and the other girls would apportion blame if such an attack transpires in this instance?

Crucially, there is the reason for the Amherst frat boys' visit to an all-girl college to consider. The Hawaiian themed Comonawannaleiya (C'mon-I-wanna-lay-ya) party, 'which Lenore thought was really funny and clever, and they were going to give out leis, ha, to all the men who came from other schools and could get in with ID's. They had a whole room full of leis, Lenore had seen after dinner' (p. 10). The word 'lei' happens to serve as both singular and plural in the Hawaiian language, and so Wallace uses the anglicised version to work as a *double entendre*: leis, meaning the garlands worn around the shoulders; and 'lay', a colloquial form of sexual conquest. The 'c'mon-I-wanna-lay-ya' party is a potential (not actual) invitation to copulate, depending on how it is read, put forth by the girls at the college. Once more, the text directs the reader's attention to the use of language, and back to Wittgenstein's views on use and meaning. Boswell notes Wittgenstein's abandonment of a search for 'elementary propositions' in light of the 'multifarious ambiguity of "language games"', and that Wallace attempts to follow a similar path in *Broom*, with the 'affirmation of communication disorder' (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 59). For example, the room full of leis that Lenore refers to can be viewed as both the garlands *and* the girls who are hosting the party. What is evident from this is that the standards that women must adhere to in their behaviour is distorted,

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<sup>21</sup> An explicit example of the brute force on display is Biff physically blocking the door to prevent the girls from leaving, while 'banging his head on the door over and over really hard' (p. 15). The threat of physical violence is the way in which Biff ensures that the boys will get what they came for.

and dangerously so, emphasizing Halberstam's idea of adolescence as a site of punishment for girls. For Lenore, the party's theme offers a sense of fun, yet the frat boys have other ideas. It is certainly clear that the tone of the party is open to different forms of interpretation, and Biff Diggerence is only too happy to inform the girls in the dormitory of this:

"You have these parties that you advertise out our ears, all this cute teasing bullshit, 'Come to the Comonawannaleiya party, get lei'd at the door', ha. 'Win a trip to the hot tubs for two', blah-blah-blah. You're just teases of the cockular sort, is what you are. So we come, like you ask and advertise for, and we put on ties, and we come over, and then we find you got security guards at the doors, with freaking *guns*, and we gotta have our hands stamped like fifth-graders for beer, and all the girls look at us like we're rapists, and plus, besides, all the girls down there look like Richard Nixon, while all the real babes lock themselves up here--"

"Like you lovely ladies, you must admit," Wang-Dang Lang says with a smile (p. 19).

Biff's outburst typifies an example of Wallace's engagement with Wittgensteinian philosophy that recurs throughout the novel: that of 'use' and 'meaning', with respect to words. It seems clear, judging by the armed guards and by the alleged Richard Nixon-esque attendees, that the Comonawannaleiya party is not an open invitation to debauchery and orgy, as far as the students of the girls' college are concerned. However, considering Biff and Lang's sudden occupation of the girls' room (with the threat of violence), there is a sense that the boys hope for more than mere teasing of the 'cockular sort', and that they fully expect to 'get lei'd', in the colloquial sense—thus speaking to Sedgwick's freedom and fear argument once more. Thus, Biff's retort stands as a means of accusing the girls of hypocrisy, and in his and Lang's minds this justifies the act of sexual intimidation and aggression that follows. Here, it is most evident the way in which pieces of information are 'filled in' where absolute clarity around situations is lacking—in this sense, the language around gender relations is problematic because at the extreme end of the spectrum this leads to behaviour such as the frat boys exhibit, which then filters out into the wider society.

## 2.2 The 1980s and Discord in Gender Discourse

A key factor here, as elsewhere in Wallace's *oeuvre*, is that there are multiple viewpoints at work simultaneously. This is evident when paying close attention to the dynamics of gender expressed through the language used to describe them, particularly around that of gender relations, and which Wallace engages with in the opening chapter in his inclusion of campus rape as a topic for discussion. Wallace's text offers different viewpoints from which a reader can choose, or not, to engage with such themes. Indeed, in this instance the text provides a premise around gender relations at the toxic end of the spectrum, where sexual assault and rape exist, and the narrative allows for the topic to be commented upon critically. For instance, the low-level threat of sexual violence that the Amherst boys wield in the opening chapter extends itself to a consideration of fraternity house initiations, and wider learned behaviours on campus. In this instance, Biff and Lang are instructed, presumably by the older boys in the fraternity, to go out and have their bare 'asses' signed—again, the rites of passage of which Halberstam speaks. Biff exhibits violence, annoyance, and produces his own extremely skewed version of a valid argument (detailed above). Of course, the validity of Biff's argument very much depends on viewpoint as he expresses the sexual frustration he feels at not getting 'lei'd'. Wang-Dang Lang adopts a calmer and 'creepy' approach as he coerces Mindy into 'consenting' to his advances. Here, the behaviour is suggestive of unspoken 'codes'. Jia Tolentino describes a hypothetical situation that speaks to this:

The boy and the girl start talking. [...] At 2 a.m., when the party begins to clear, one of them says they should get a bite, but no place on campus is open. They go to her bedroom, but there's nowhere comfortable to sit except the bed. What happens next is a blur of mismatched fears and assumptions. The girl panics, freezes, thinks the guy will hurt her if she yells at him, [...]. The guy, having half-deliberately drunk himself beyond conscious decision-making, ignores her stiffness and whatever she's mumbling; he thinks he's doing exactly what college students are supposed to do (Tolentino).

Again, much of what Tolentino describes are unspoken codes. The girl assumes the worst based upon her knowledge of such situations. The boy assumes that

this is what boys do in girls' rooms. If it were commonplace to enter into conversation, here, as a kind of dating protocol that ensures consent between parties, then one can assume a healthier outcome. But society does not yet operate in this way. Instead, when faced with an abuse of one's own personal space, as both Tolentino and *Broom's* opening chapter describe, decisions are made based upon the information at hand. With the addition of alcohol, aggression, and a sense of entitlement to complicate matters further, a person may feel that they have no control over a situation as it develops—and a lack of options as a result of this.

Indeed, Clarice acts unperturbed as events unfold, even though her actions contradict the earlier words of advice that she gave to Lenore on how to avoid becoming a 'victim'. Sue Shaw becomes the archetypal 'victim' as she 'whimpers and gets set to cry' (p. 17). Thus, the scene is filled with all manner of adolescent theatrics—roles that the characters feel pressure to adopt in response to the frat boys' actions. Conversely, Lenore is the only person in the room who is not under the influence of alcohol or pot, and as such takes a different approach in her refusal to 'act' as a victim in front of the Amherst frat boys. This in spite of the fact that the reader is aware that Lenore remains deeply disturbed by proceedings, expressed through the point-of-view narration discussed earlier. Here, Lenore's calmness under significant duress allows her to survey the scene and influence the picture that the reader has of the room's interior. The potential for critical observation is highlighted in the text's use of motifs of seeing—Lenore's point of view allows the reader to see the dysfunctional elements of the boys' behaviour. Here, Lenore's age (fifteen) offers no protection from the threat of Andy and Biff. In fact, she is treated equally as seen when Lang sets out the terms of the initiation:

"Sign your asses?" says Mindy Metalman.

"That is unfortunately affirmative," Lang says, flashing a smile of bright teeth over at Lenore.

[...]

"...we are requahred to secure the signatures of no fewer than *fahv* of Mount Holyoke's loveliest before sunrise tomorrow. We figger of course we can sign each other, being friends and all, but that's just one each." He looks around significantly at each of the girls, gives Lenore a bit of a wink (pp. 17-18).



Effectively, Lang points to the existence of 'rules' associated with frat boy initiations, and the like—the way in which certain college aged boys learn to practice particular modes of behaviour, without ever discussing their inherent harmfulness. In this instance, it is the conduct around that of gender relations, though they are presented here as far from healthy or desirable. Once more, Sedgwick's words on the institutional misogyny that she finds at Amherst upon her arrival are pertinent, for the learned behaviour at college will translate into habitual behaviour in the wider U.S. society—Sedgwick asserts that this takes place in the workplace, post-education, because when a woman gets there 'your economic value doesn't come from how much you're paying but from how much you're paid', which notes the gender imbalance in the workplace (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 14). Following Lang's clarification, Lenore looks around the room and sees 'Sue Shaw sitting there all quiet, looking at her leather shoes with the white soles. Biff's hands are in Sue's bright red hair' (p. 18). At this point Clarice steps in to tell Lang that she will not be signing any 'asses', to which Lang replies that "we very regrettably will find ourselves unable to leave until you do". Lenore looks across at Lang, 'who now has his hand lightly on Mindy's bare leg, Lenore notices. Lenore shivers a bit' (p. 18). Clarice continues an unsuccessful attempt to stamp her authority on the situation:

"You Amherst guys, U-Mass too, all of you. Just because you're bigger [...] you think—*do* you think?—think you can [...] make women do whatever stupid rotten disgusting stuff you say you want just because you're drunk? [...] You come over to our parties, [...] trash us, act like we're meat, or furniture, think you can just [...] *invade* us, our *room*, for no other reason than that you're just stronger" (p. 18, emphasis original).

The wider use of 'you' throughout this passage speaks of broad ranging targets, where all men are implicated in abusive practices—and this links once more with Sedgwick's 'Sabrina'. Clarice's outburst of anger at the boys' drunken, loutish, and threatening behaviour, speaks of a dire state of affairs where gender relations are concerned in this respect. Though Clarice appears to be the most authoritative of the girls at this moment, she is soon left feeling helpless when 'Biff pounds the door with the back of his head again, a few times, emphasizing the general state of affairs' (p. 18). Clarice, with more than a touch of irony, pronounces: "'You shiny bastards," she finally gets out. [...] "Screw you.

Screw you'" (p. 18). The intrusion, threat, and intimidation look set to continue with no end until the fifteen-year-old Lenore stands up to Biff and Lang, declining to sign their 'asses', and refusing to stay in the room any longer. Again, this separates Lenore from the other girls, both literally and metaphorically.

Eventually, Lenore makes her way out of the room, after threatening to take out Biff's eye with the heel of one of her shoes, whereas the other three girls yield and agree to the terms of the frat boy initiation. In this respect, Joffe asserts that through such action 'Lenore, in her resistance to the intruders, comes to embody empowered womanhood', though this is problematic because of the use of violence as a method of counteracting violence (Joffe, p. 153). Lenore's point of view continues to influence the narration as she offers her perspective on the situation as it unfolds. In particular, it is the way in which Lenore views the other girls in their capitulation that suggests the complexity of gender discourse in the area of sexual assault and rape. Lenore brands Sue Shaw a coward before pointing out the ugliness of Mindy Metalman's feet to Lang, but Lenore remains surprisingly quiet with respect to her older sister, Clarice, and this is most poignant. Lenore refuses to become a victim, as the youngest of the room's occupants. In contrast, the older sister, Clarice, acts as if she is not a victim while standing, waiting to sign the boys 'asses' with 'her arms crossed. Tapping her fingers on her arms' (p. 20). Again, this relates back to Tolentino's analogy of the boy and girl in the dorm room where compromise is often made in order to ensure the least violent outcome, which speaks to the dysfunctionality of gender relations as expressed in frat boys' behaviour towards young women students. Set against this position, Lenore's victory to secure her freedom is neither easy nor without cost, and is an endeavour that she makes alone:

Lenore runs out into the tiled hall, away. Outside there will be air, Lenore wants out of Rumpus Hall very much, and gets out, finally she does, but only after negotiating a hall door, a stair door, a hall door, and a front door, all locked tight from the inside. Out in the crusty March lawn, by the wash of the well-lit street, amid crowds of boys in blue blazers going up the walk, putting Certs in their mouths, she enjoys a brief nosebleed (pp. 20-21).

Note the ironic effect in the detail linked to the girls' security, which in itself speaks to the state of gender relations where college girls must lock themselves

in to avoid frat boys and their bad behaviour. As Lenore escapes what sounds like the infantilising surroundings of Rumpus Hall, the amount of protection and security (locked doors all locked from the inside) does little to protect the girls from Biff and Lang's forced intrusion. Following her escape, Lenore finds herself out on the lawn, amid crowds of boys who are placing mints in their mouths. This indicates a loop in the system where the boys aim to keep their breath fresh on their way to the Comonawannaleiya party, which suggests that they expect some form of physical contact with the girls at the party. Which may lead to further examples of frustration from the boys should the contact not match any preconceived ideas that they have. At this moment in time though, the boys outside seem to be far less threatening than the frat boys from whom she escapes, and her actions show that she chooses not to be a victim. The price of Lenore's autonomy is that she gets to 'enjoy' a nosebleed. Joffe comments on the 'framing of the novel in terms of empowered femininity and crumbling masculinity [that] reflects the rapid institutionalization of second-wave feminism in the 1980s' (Joffe, p. 155). Crumbling masculinity may be hopeful in this assessment—toxic masculinity is more apt in this instance. This is exactly the cultural situation that Sedgwick arrives in at Amherst, where gender politics receives heightened prominence in cultural discourse precisely because of the continuing discord that exists at the extreme end of the spectrum of gender relations.

What is for sure is that the nosebleed itself is a sign of Lenore's efforts to escape the situation, and is a symbol of the stress and strain she endures following Lang and Biff's intrusion. Lenore's struggle acts as a sign of the potential sexual violence brought about by the frat boys' intrusion, and also of the wider failures of college administrations to deal effectively with issues of campus rape and wider misogyny. The lack of clear policy from colleges leads to survivors of sexual assault and rape feeling as if they are to blame, or as if they are in the wrong. For instance, Epifano's closing remarks on the rape she suffered at Amherst, and the subsequent appalling treatment received at the hands of Amherst's administration, gives a clear indication of the long-lasting effects on a person's life:

The fact that such a prestigious institution could have such a noxious interior fills me with intense remorse mixed with sour distaste. I am sickened by the Administration's attempts to cover up survivors' stories, cook their books to discount rapes, pretend that withdrawals never occur, quell attempts at change, and sweep sexual assaults under a rug. When politicians cover up affairs or scandals the masses often rise up in angry protestations and call for a more transparent government. What is the difference between a government and the Amherst College campus? Why can't we know what is really happening on campus? Why should we be quiet about sexual assault (Epifano)?

Epifano's article appears three decades after the period in which the opening chapter of *Broom* is set, yet little appears to have changed in this time. Echoing the depth of harm that such incidents cause, Lenore returns to the event as an adult when in conversation with one of the frat boys in question, Andrew Sealand. Here, there is occasion to read the move from a confident, intelligent, socially mobile fifteen-year-old Lenore, to a self-doubting, undergoing regular psychoanalysis, entry-level job, twenty-four-year-old Lenore, as a direct result of the incident inside the girls' dormitory room at Mount Holyoke College. Whereas Franzen and Ellis insert rape into their narratives as a way of underscoring the fixed reality of women's lives, with no apparent effort to engage with the issue as a cultural problem that needs urgent attention, the latter part of Wallace's text revisits the incident:

"I hated you", Lenore said into his shirt, talking to his chest. "You came in that time, and terrorized us, and were drunk, and that guy's stupid bottom, and Sue Shaw was so *scared*".

"It's OK", Lang was saying softly. "It's OK. We were all just kids. We were just kids. That's all it was".

"And I say I don't want you, that I'm mad, and have a right to be, and everybody just winks, and nudges, and gets a tone, and pushes, pushes, pushes". Lang's shirt was getting wet. "I've just felt so *dirty*. So out of control" (p. 404, emphasis original).

Lenore is clearly still affected by the incident almost a decade later, not wanting to be a victim but expressing feelings that are common in those who survive such incidents, however innocuous the perpetrator may feel his actions are. Again, her reaction emphasizes the gender discourse of the novel's opening chapter. Equally, Lang's attempt to excuse his conduct mirrors society's tolerance of it, and college administration inaction on issues of campus rape

allows for the normalization of such behaviour in wider society. The fact that the opening chapter of Wallace's debut novel receives barely any critical analysis in the three decades since publication speaks to the wider acceptance of campus rape. Lenore is Wallace's first attempt at writing through a woman's voice and perspective, yet her importance to the text is overlooked. Why is this? Is it because 'the novel's attempt to reimagine the gender order fails, as the focus moves away from Lenore and her empowerment and settles instead on [...] Lang's sexual exploits, Rick's sexual fiascos, and the author's own metafictional performance', as Joffe states (Joffe, p. 155)? Though I agree with Joffe that 'the relative infancy of Wallace's personal political progress is revealed' in *Broom* (also evident in his 'AIDS' essay), this thesis differs in its conclusions and this is shown as the chapter progresses.

## 2.4 Challenging Axioms of Gender

Continuing from the above, Dr Curtis Jay, Lenore's therapist, offers the reader an opportunity to think creatively around categories of sex and gender when stating that '[w]e are helpless and inefficacious as parts of a system until we recognize the existence of the system' (p. 333). Once more, the motif attached to the novel's title is brought to mind: Wittgenstein's 'broom'. Lance Olsen posits that for Wittgenstein the world 'was a maze of absolutely impaired language games', and that Wallace is 'right behind him' in questioning 'the efficacy of language' and the 'validity of systems of meaning which is to question the efficacy of systems of narrative which is to question the validity of systems of identity which is to question the veracity of systems of reality'.<sup>22</sup> In this manner, Dr Jay brings his own unique manner of encouraging his patients to achieve a state of recognition, and he is psychologist to both Rick Vigorous and Lenore—appearing both unorthodox in his methods (gas masks and revolving chairs speak to this), and unethical in his dealings with his patients (accepting money from Rick and others, Lenore's namesake included, in order to manipulate Lenore's feelings). In spite of this, Dr Jay articulates a very simple premise—

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<sup>22</sup> Lance Olsen, 'Termite Art, Or Wallace's Wittgenstein', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13 (1993), 199, (p. 212).

that all men and women are formed out of a combination of the male *and* female sex, and that to be able to consider a human subject, whether our own subjectivity or that of another, it is necessary to be aware of this fact. Indeed, during one of Lenore's therapy sessions Dr Jay posits a philosophical pronouncement on sex and gender while conversing with Lenore. Dr Jay tells her to: "remember that you are half-sperm, Lenore [...] Your father's sperm. It's part of you. Inseparable" (p. 332). What then does this do to notions of subjectivity, and to Hayes-Brady's notion that Wallace only ever refers to gender difference, if a person is inseparable from the father's sperm, and from the mother's ovum?

In effect, Dr Jay, the 'D.J.' who literally spins his clients in and out of his consulting room, lays waste to this system of classification that appears as axiomatic in society—that a man's body is only ever male, and a woman's body only ever female, and that the two cannot co-exist within the same body.<sup>23</sup> Dr Jay cuts to the heart of the question of human subjectivity by suggesting that the system of human reproduction should be thought of as inherently linked to notions of identity. Effectively, by utilising a blend of male and female, and by extension of masculinity and femininity, in order to construct man and woman. Additionally, Dr Jay questions the efficacy of the long-held belief that the sperm latches on to the ovum before burrowing its way in to fertilize the egg (a perfect expression of the active/passive trope that exists around gender relations).<sup>24</sup> Dr Jay explains:

The strong, clean membrane chooses what to suck inside itself and lets all the rest bounce dirtily off. [...] These membranes withstand the onslaught of the countless Other-set, ceaselessly battering, the Others, their heads coated with filth [...] and the secure membrane/ovum waits patiently [...] and, yes, occasionally will let an Other in, will suck it in, on the membrane's terms, will

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<sup>23</sup> Even though we know that the human body produces examples of ambiguous genitalia, and also examples where genitalia, other internal organs, and chromosomes of 'both sexes' exist in a single subject (intersex). Yet in spite of this, the clearly defined categories of man/woman and male/female persist without question, it seems.

<sup>24</sup> Emily Martin, 'The Egg and the Sperm: How Science has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16 (1991), 485-501 (pp. 485, 500). Emily Martin suggests that this belief persists even though biology has proven this not to be the case (and in fact, that the sperm and egg actually co-operate to achieve said union), because of an inability to think beyond 'stereotypical male-female roles', and because of science's tendency to implant 'social imagery on representations of nature so as to lay a firm basis for reimporting exactly that same imagery as natural explanations of social phenomena'. This fits with the essentialist thinking put forth by the French feminists.

suck it in like a sperm, will take it inside itself to renew, to create itself anew (pp. 330-331).

Here, Dr Jay uses the membrane/ovum metaphor to discuss relationships, and issues of identity involving notions of self/other. He problematizes roles of passivity (ovum) and domination (sperm), and also the notion of choice by focusing his argument on an organ of the body that functions independently. When Dr Jay tells Lenore that where Andy Lang is concerned she should 'strengthen the membrane' and 'let it be permeated as *you* desire it so', he creates a paradox centred on notions of strengthening and permeating (p. 332, emphasis original). If to strengthen a membrane is to make it stronger, how does that make the permeation of the membrane easier to achieve? Simply put, Dr Jay suggests that Lenore is in control of both actions, thus undermining conventional ideas around active/passive behaviour that is assigned according to both gender and sex. This is a small but significant detail when considering Hayes-Brady's hypothesis that includes the following:

[T]he comparative lack in [Wallace's] writing of fully developed female characters (p. 132); [Wallace's] separate articulation of masculine and feminine identities (p. 133); Wallace's "misogyny" is based in instability, in which the feminine functions as a stabilizing Other for the masculine Self (p. 134); [and that] Lenore represents the passivity of the feminine, which contrasts sharply with the active male [...] that permeate the narrative. Lenore does not tell, she is told [...], she remains wholly out of reach to the reader, acted upon rather than active, always and only alien (Hayes-Brady, p. 135).<sup>25</sup>

Hayes-Brady even uses the same language of passivity and permeation that Dr Jay attempts to disrupt with his analogy of the sperm and the ovum. Here, it is my assertion that *The Broom of the System* offers an early example of the kind of philosophical skepticism that is evident throughout Wallace's writings, with respect to issues of gender and/or sex,<sup>26</sup> and that Hayes-Brady's hypothesis, as set out above (in part), can be argued against by conducting a close reading of the text that is not unduly informed by axioms specific to this U.S. cultural context—that of Anglo-American post-industrial society.

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<sup>25</sup> And here, as before, note the interchangeable way Hayes-Brady uses terms associated with sex with which to discuss gender.

<sup>26</sup> Not that I suggest this is a deliberate tactic on Wallace's part, but rather that it is a facet of his work that develops over time as a by-product of this philosophical engagement.

## 2.5 *Girl with Curious Hair*

Wallace's collection of short stories is published three years after *Broom*, and aspects of this text continue to exhibit similar concerns as his debut novel. An example of this is seen in Faye and Julie's relationship in 'Little Expressionless Animals', the opening story of the collection, which continues with themes of sexual abuse, and offers examples of 'hideous' men (and later, a 'hideous' woman). The story begins in 1976 with two children abandoned by their mother at the side of the road before jumping to a scene in a cinema in 1970. A woman sitting in the cinema watches cartoons with a child next to her and is disturbed as '[a] man sits behind the woman. He leans forward. His hands enter the woman's hair' (Wallace, *Girl*, p. 4). The narrative continues: 'the woman's eyes are bright with fear. She sits absolutely still. The man plays with her red hair' (Wallace, *Girl*, p. 4). As with the opening to *Broom*, Wallace's text begins by highlighting an act of sexual abuse, albeit in a far more brief way than in his debut novel. The act itself is invasive, causing paralysis in the woman, temporarily, as the man privileges his own desires over that of the stranger he sexually assaults. Just as Lenore returns to the incident of sexual intimidation later in *Broom*, in order to make plain the lasting effects such behaviour has on a person, this act of sexual abuse is also revisited as the story unfolds. Faye and Julie, the story's protagonists, are having a conversation on how best Faye can explain to other people about the lesbian relationship they have formed. As the dialogue nears its conclusion in this respect, Faye recalls the cinema abuse, adding in the lasting effects that the sexual abuse has on the woman (revealed here as Julie's mother). The reader is told that Julie's mother 'breaks down' and must be 'restrained' because she is 'so hysterical' that she even 'tears at her [own] beautiful hair' (Wallace, *Girl*, p. 37). And then the reveal: 'He was touching her in a sexual way. She was horrified and repulsed, but didn't make a sound, [...] for fear that you, the child, would discover that a strange man in the dark was touching your mother in a sexual way' (Wallace, *Girl*, p. 38). The retelling, here, is the last in a series of 'examples' of things that may in fact 'turn



one into' a lesbian, with each mini-story populated with at least one form of 'hideous' man (Wallace, *Girl*, pp. 32-9). Jackson takes a view that 'Wallace acknowledges and at times criticizes toxic male sexuality, but he refuses to entertain the possibility that men can behave otherwise – apparently and tautologically, *because* they are men' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 3, emphasis original). Though there are countless examples of men's bad behaviour towards women throughout Wallace's *corpus*, not all men are presented in such a way, and this will become apparent as the thesis progresses.

Julie's back story links with Lenore's not only in terms of the sexual abuse they are exposed to at a young age, but also in the text's rather naïve thoughts on why some women 'become' lesbians (this naivety is noted earlier in the chapter, where Sedgwick, Butler, and Halberstam all offer their own thoughts on why this occurs). Boswell sees 'weighty issues' addressed in this particular story, of 'the fluidity of boundaries like self-and-other and hetero-versus homosexual desire', which are deserving of more sustained criticism (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 70). Similarly, Steve Gronert Ellerhoff asserts that Faye and Julie's 'love, as queer Americans, exists in an era where many in the mainstream denied its possibility of existence. The noise of societal discourse, trapped in Julie's habit of analysing information, is what she has to break through to reach Faye.'<sup>27</sup> Here, then, Wallace's texts place this societal discourse in prominent positions (opening chapter/story of debut novel and short story collection, respectively), and offer ways to think in alternative ways about both campus rape and lesbian relationships. However, when Wallace's texts touch upon male homosexuality a far less positive depiction is evident. In 'Lyndon', which Ellerhoff views as '[a]nother story of love for a queer protagonist' (David Boyd), there is a moment where Wallace's text focuses on the social exclusion faced by homosexuals in mid-Twentieth Century America (Ellerhoff, 'Proteus', p. 119). Upon hearing rumours of his son's homosexuality, David's father asks him whether he can control his 'sexual preferences' and instead 'be capable of heterosexual love, of marriage and a family and a pillar-type position in the community', as if love, marriage, and respect are merely the preserve of

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<sup>27</sup> Steve G. Ellerhoff, 'Proteus Bound: Pinning Girl with Curious Hair Under Short Story Theory', in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Philip Coleman (Massachusetts: Grey House Publishing, 2015), pp. 112-127, (p. 119).

heterosexuals (Wallace, *Girl*, p. 86). David's inability to accede to his father's view of 'respectable' adulthood results in the breakdown of relations with his parents, and so the first signs of negativity attached to male homosexuality are evident in the text, though Boswell views this aspect as written with 'empathy and objectivity' (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 82).

Where Wallace avoids delving into acts of lesbian sexual activity, opting instead for descriptions of the tenderness and affection that Julie and Faye show to one another, in 'Lyndon' male homosexual acts are described in a more harsh manner: 'He opened me roughly, rudely'; 'He sodomized me violently'; and 'I had cried out several times in pain' (Wallace, *Girl*, p. 99). Here, there is a violence and lack of tenderness between men that accompanies sexual activity, as Wallace writes it. Indeed, Jackson views Wallace's 'depiction of anal intercourse between men as a source of disease and death', and in Jackson's reading of Lee Edelman, the 'male sexual toxicity' that he investigates 'accords with this [Edelman's] idea of queer negativity' whereby 'ideas of anti-procreation' abound. Jackson positions Wallace's use of 'male gender identity' as 'support[ing] the [reproductive] futurity that Edelman would rather abort' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 7). In focusing solely on male homosexuality, Jackson fails to account for Wallace's women, like Faye and Julie, whose same-sex relationships are equally potentially anti-procreation but are written far more sympathetically and by all accounts far less dysfunctional than those in the heterosexual matrix. Arguably, in the most tender, extended writing of a lesbian (or, simply any) relationship in Wallace's *corpus*, Faye and Julie afford the opportunity to think through a lens where imagining the intimacy between a lesbian couple is far easier for the heterosexual man who writes them (Wallace). An example of Wallace's writing exemplifying a more sympathetic, non-ironic style, here, is a moment of tenderness: 'They hold each other. [...] The dark drifts down around them and fits like a gardener's glove. It is incredibly romantic' (Wallace, *Girl*, p. 4). This is a far cry from the dysfunctional relationships that litter Wallace's *corpus*, and though there are references to the two having sex, these are never described explicitly (Wallace, *Girl*, p. 4). Rather there is more tactile, loving behaviour on display between Faye and Julie, and consistently so. The examples given demonstrate the thematic connection that

exists in Wallace's texts' negative portrayal of the heterosexual matrix, and their constant concern with gender relations.

## 2.6 Conclusion

Throughout *Broom* then, Lenore remains the novel's central concern, regardless of how her interactions with others are interpreted. It is productive to think of Lenore as a tool with which the novel reflects social situations and gender relations to the reader.<sup>28</sup> What Hayes-Brady views as purely passive is better described as a symbiosis of passivity and action, where Lenore is neither restricted, nor governed by limited notions of masculinity and femininity, but where she effects a hybrid of activity and passivity depending on the situations she encounters—her own specific form of female masculinity. For instance, the early part of the novel presents Rick as the more dominant of the two with respect to the narrative, where Lenore listens to the Fieldbinder stories attentively. However, this apparent passivity may also be viewed as a form of activity on Lenore's part because she enjoys the stories and encourages him to share them with her, mostly—befitting of her position as a filter of cultural narrative. Likewise, Lenore's narrative presence grows in terms of the amount of direct discourse she engages in, as her relationship with Rick diminishes and as she spends more time with Andy Lang. In addition, Andy Lang's overtly sexual behaviour modifies to such an extent that by the novel's end there is not a hint of sexual aggression, predation, or domination where his interaction with Lenore is concerned, which cannot then diminish Lenore's empowerment, as both Joffe and Hayes-Brady suggest. In fact, the transformation in Lang's behaviour in this respect is remarkable given that the person introduced to Lenore in the opening chapter of the novel is akin to that of a sexual predator, at best, and that he is the person who ends his marriage to Mindy Metalman (a marriage about which he confesses to 'have fucking betrayed [Mindy], hundreds

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<sup>28</sup> And Lenore is considered by many critics to be the novel's protagonist (O'Donnell, Hayes-Brady, Tracey), an interesting factoid when one considers that the only first-person voice that appears throughout the novel is that of Rick Vigorous. Given that a first-person narrative tends to be the more dominant, for obvious reasons, it is odd that *Broom* has never been considered to be a novel primarily concerned with Rick - even more interesting when one remembers that it befalls Rick to utter the novel's very last... [word] (p. 467).

of times' (p. 177)) by telling her that 'you've just run out of holes in your pretty body, and I've run out of things to stick in them' (p. 176). Indeed, by the end of the novel Lang is content with cuddling and light fondling as he lies on the bed with Lenore, which mirrors Lenore and Rick's interactions as the reader is first introduced to them in chapter two (pp. 408-17). Lenore subdues and deflects both Rick's and Lang's sexuality through the need to engage with terminology, turning intimate contact into moments more concerned with language use.

To further argue against Hayes-Brady's claims, note the extent to which Rick dominates most of the conversations he enters into. For instance, there is prolonged dialogue between Rick and Andy on a Stoneciphenco aeroplane, where Lenore manages to sleep through, or pretends to sleep through the entirety of the conversation (pp. 257-71). The exchange begins with an equal amount of direct discourse between Rick and Andy, interspersed with the odd comment from the Stoneciphenco stewardess, and a 'sleeping' Lenore (marked oddly by the onomatopoeic word, 'fnoof'). Following this, Rick's voice dominates the narrative as he tells Andy stories about Lenore and her family, and even of his obsession with possessing Lenore (pp. 262-70). Rick is dominant with whomever he speaks, whether man or woman, and so Hayes-Brady's assessment of Lenore as 'represent[ing] the passivity of the feminine, which contrasts sharply with the active male' does not work. Especially, when Andy Lang is shown as passive in this particular extract (he also listens attentively to Rick), in spite of Hayes-Brady referring to Rick as 'an unsuccessful masculine subject', but without elaborating on why this description should only apply to Rick (Hayes-Brady, pp. 135, 138). It is possible that Rick provides his own answer to this when in discussion with Lenore he confesses that 'I'm more than a little neurotic. [...] I know I'm fussy and vaguely effeminate. [...] And sexually intrinsically inadequate, Lenore, let's please both explicitly face it, for once. I cannot possibly satisfy you' (p. 286). Here, Rick not only counts himself as an unsuccessful masculine subject, but provides a description that makes him sound positively passive. Thus, a more apt way of approaching the novel is to consider the paradox that becomes apparent when recognizing the lack of fixity, certainty, and surety that exists for all of the subjects in the novel: Rick struggles with his possessive nature, which ultimately provides an

insurmountable barrier between him and Lenore; Lenore is unable to rid herself of the feeling of being manipulated and 'controlled' by others; Andy is unsure when to act like a Texan 'good ol' boy' (read sexist/sexual predator) and when not to; Clarice and the Spaniard family seem more stable when performing their 'acts' of group therapy, whilst wearing masks, than they are as a 'conventional' family unit; Norman Bombardini insists that he must eat until large enough to consume everything around him in order to conquer his feelings with respect to notions of self and other; and there are many other examples throughout the novel. Contrast the sense of the subjects' uncertainty with the rigidity of systems within which they exist, and encounter routinely in daily life, and soon there comes a hyper-awareness of the tensions that arise, and the language system that attempts to hold them rigidly in place.<sup>29</sup>

In subtle ways throughout Wallace's *corpus*, 'norms' of gender (or gendered 'norms') are manipulated, subverted, challenged, interrogated, and most fundamental of all, are not treated with the kind of reverence that sees them as axioms never to be questioned. Indeed, we see this in the reading of the stories from *Girl*, where both female homosexuality and male homosexuality are given prominence, and where each is treated with some sympathy at this point (though less so for the depiction of male homosexuality). Wallace's texts afford the reader opportunities to question the efficacy and legitimacy of certain, axiomatic notions that otherwise remain prevalent and dominant throughout the whole of Western society—in this instance, of those concerning gender relations, and to a lesser extent of societal views on sexuality. Wallace's use of comedic effect, farcical situations, and the distortion of language, all serve to act as disruptive elements, and when this is applied to the texts' engagement with gender and gender relations in particular, the effect is that of destabilising habits of gender, and/or gendered habits that point towards 'normalisation' and conformity. Here, yet another link with queer feminist theory arises, especially after a consideration of the ways in which Halberstam's theory of female masculinity works with a reading of Lenore Beadsman. Indeed, I suggest that

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<sup>29</sup> The focus of this thesis in relation to *Broom* is concerned with systems that govern relationships, particularly where they impact most noticeably with respect to gender, but of course there are many others that could be considered (monetary systems, systems used to disseminate propaganda, systems of power connected to both commerce and politics, to name but a few).

this is the case throughout his *corpus*, where the opportunity lies with the reader to choose to consider such things, or to choose not to. This kind of 'freedom to choose' is made explicit in Wallace's Kenyon College commencement address, since published as *This is Water* (2009).<sup>30</sup> Toward the end of the address Wallace gives rise to the idea that we operate mainly via our unconscious 'default settings', and that by doing so we choose a form of 'freedom' that sees us:

[...] getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing. And the so-called "real world" will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called "real world" of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of the self (Wallace, *Water*, pp. 114-115).

Wallace terms this kind of thinking as, 'the freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation' (Wallace, *Water*, p. 117). Then goes on to counter this with:

But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom (Wallace, *Water*, pp. 119-121).

Here is an effective, if rather broad, diatribe from Wallace about the benefits of thought, awareness, and the effort to pay attention to the world around (and the systems that govern within). In the vein of 'paying attention', the chapter begins with a close reading of Lenore's involvement in the text, and demonstrates that until recently such readings are not evident in critical analyses of Wallace's debut novel. There are good reasons why this must be rectified because rape and sexual assault continue to feature as themes throughout Wallace's fiction, which become more problematic and disturbing as his *oeuvre* progresses—mirroring the wider cultural issues in this area, which begin with the motif of

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<sup>30</sup> David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (UK: Hachette, 2009).

campus rape in the novel's opening. These are elements that exist at the extreme end of the spectrum of gender relations, which suggests an imbalance in the very notions of gender that allows for the prevalence of such crimes in the first place. This thesis will continue by making links between Wallace's non-fiction and his works of fiction, particularly around notions of the problematization of gender (the first example being Lenore's female masculinity), and this not only adds to existing readings of Wallace and gender, but also acts as a method for forging connection rather than disparity in terms of gender relations. The heterosexual matrix is itself such a dominant theme in society that it radiates outwards, imbuing its own perverse 'normality' as axiomatic. Reading against the grain in this manner will continue to prove useful in a consideration of Wallace's non-fiction, published following *Broom* and prior to his *magnum opus*, *Infinite Jest*. Maintaining an intense focus on language use and terminology throughout Wallace's writing is key to this.

### 3. WALLACE'S NON-FICTION, LANGUAGE, and GENDER DISCOURSE

This chapter demonstrates David Foster Wallace's interest in gender discourse, and of how this is a key aspect that will shape the representation of gender as it appears throughout his works of fiction that follow. This is achieved, in part, through a consideration of some of the critical work that exists on Wallace's treatment of the female, and in his attempts at writing from a feminist perspective, and by taking the lead from Mary K. Holland's work on gender in Wallace. It also points to the complicated nature of Wallace's awareness of gender, and the growing body of criticism in Wallace studies where many of his works are viewed as problematic with respect to issues of gender.<sup>1</sup> As shown in the Introduction via Clare Hayes-Brady's analysis of Wallace's texts, there exists an argument that views Wallace as unable to articulate women's perspectives, or indeed that his works suffer from a weakness in female characterization. The aim of this chapter is to provide a nuanced approach to Wallace's texts, showing that with respect to his engagement with gender discourse, and particularly his representation of male *and* female characters (of which, more sustained critical analysis is required), there is sufficient ambiguity with which to offer an alternative reading.<sup>2</sup> As stated, Holland's work forms the basis for an on-going

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Megan Garber, 'David Foster Wallace And The Dangerous Romance Of Male Genius', *The Atlantic*, 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/the-world-still-spins-around-male-genius/559925/>> [Accessed 2 December 2019]. Garber's article references Mary Karr's claims of violent and stalker-like behaviour from Wallace, her ex-boyfriend.

<sup>2</sup> Attended to throughout the chapters dealing with Wallace's fiction.



discussion of gender discourse in Wallace, and in particular the claims she makes of two of Wallace's essays. Also, there is a consideration of Wallace's thoughts on the writings of Updike. In addition, there is a reading of Wallace's 'HIV/AIDS essay', in which Charles Nixon accuses Wallace of exhibiting misogynistic and sexist tendencies—my reading offers a different perspective, where Wallace once more demonstrates an alignment with feminist principles around the disparity that exists between the genders, and the very real harm that arises as a result. Following this, a discussion of Wallace's use of style in producing a distancing effect between voice and subject matter, where Wallace takes on the role of social commentator. In effect, my argument is that although at times flawed, Wallace's texts demonstrate a continued concern with feminist matters that build upon the issues raised in his debut novel, *Broom*.

Later, a detailed look at a book from Wallace's personal library demonstrates that the language around gender discourse was a source of interest to Wallace. This further cements the idea posited in the Introduction that Wallace was able to grasp the concept of gender hybridity (seen in the earlier discussion of Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*). Likewise, notions of control around gender relations prove crucial to a reading of Wallace's fiction as this and subsequent chapters progress. And finally, Wallace's essay on pornography provides an example of the use of comedic effects as an estrangement technique, which at times obscures the complexity of the subjects he writes upon, while highlighting the many contradictions inherent in the world of pornography, along with stereotypes of pornography that tend to inform outsiders' perspectives of the industry. Curiously, Wallace's pornography essay demonstrates that sexuality is not the primary focus when discussing the industry, but that issues of gender discourse and gender relations are of concern (again, the majority of which are viewed through a heterosexual matrix). In amongst all of this is Wallace's use of language and the significant occasions throughout his works that serve to undermine conventional notions of gender—all of which bears the hallmarks of gender fluid thinking more akin to that of Halberstam's work rather than gender fixity. Indeed, Judith Butler's thoughts on gender are pertinent to my reading of Wallace's works and how they destabilize conventional notions of gender:

'Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized'.<sup>3</sup> In focusing so closely on issues of gender throughout his *corpus*, Wallace presents moments where gender 'norms' are indeed disrupted and thus open to question, and in turn, are made less certain, less axiomatic. The following allows for a testing of my hypothesis with respect to Butler's thoughts, here.

### 3.1 Gender in Wallace Criticism

In 'By Hirsute Author' (2017), Mary K. Holland calls for greater critical insight into David Foster Wallace's works where gender and gender relations are concerned.<sup>4</sup> Holland rightly notes that '[i]t is curious that so little scholarship exists that considers gender, and the relationships between genders, in Wallace's work, since so much of his fiction and nonfiction takes up these issues, and since he so often defined his work, and the work of others, in gendered terms' (Holland, p. 64). Additionally, throughout the essay Holland makes reference to 'Wallace's feminist interests' and provides a thought-provoking and detailed assessment of Wallace's works in relation to this idea (Holland, p. 65). However, though Holland claims that Wallace engages with feminist thought she also suggests that Wallace appropriates feminist issues in an effort to conduct his own 'meditation on masculinity', suggesting that to focus on masculinity through a feminist lens is ill judged on Wallace's part (Holland, p. 69). Why Holland deems this an act of appropriation is problematic because it suggests that a consideration of masculinity is automatically at odds with feminist enquiry, whereas this thesis focuses on the interconnectivity and overlaps between the two. On the other hand, Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, 'Gender Regulations', in *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 49-65.

<sup>4</sup> Mary K. Holland, "'By Hirsute Author": Gender And Communication In The Work And Study Of David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies In Contemporary Fiction*, 58.1 (2017), 64-77 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2016.1149798>>. Holland's title mirrors Wallace's use of 'hirsute' in his essay on David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988). It is a word that speaks of difference between men and women, especially when viewed from the viewpoint of contemporary American society, where the promotion of hair removal for women is commonplace.

suggest something quite different at work in Wallace texts.<sup>5</sup> In a discussion of *Infinite Jest*, the treatment of a female speaker at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting is described as an embodiment of the '[n]ovel's contempt' for her, and by extension, all women (Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts, 'White Guys', p. 18). Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts make a comparison here with one of Wallace's essays, and a detailed look at their claims appears in the following chapter.

Continuing with Holland for a moment, she views Wallace's essay 'Big Red Son' (1998) as a sign that he is 'content to unmask the male 'rage' and female 'self-loathing' that perpetuate each other via pornography' (Holland, p. 70). Holland prefaces this by stating that the 'motif wending its way' through the essay 'is the misogyny that fuels an industry supposedly built on desire' (Holland, p. 70). The issue here is that this does not begin to give a complete picture of Wallace's essay, and that to take this as the basis of the essay is to submit to stereotypical views of the pornography industry: consisting solely of male perpetrators and female victims. Holland then discusses a particular period of Wallace's writing in detail, where, she claims, 'Wallace explored the bestial male appropriation of the female other to form self most overtly during the late 1990s, which produced the seducers, misogynists, and rapists of the interviews in his 1999 collection, and in the two vociferously feminist essays, both written in 1998, that lead off his *Consider the Lobster*' (Holland, p. 70). Here, Holland refers to 'Big Red Son' and 'Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think' (1998), respectively.<sup>6</sup> Holland's tone, in her use of 'bestial', affords a degree of emotiveness and even judgment to the reading. Also, in her use of the word feminist in relation to Wallace's writings, Holland implies that sex is the issue at hand—feminism primarily concerned with equality of the sexes—whereas this thesis will maintain a focus on gender discourse, and the social and cultural elements that form our notions of such things as masculinity and femininity.

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts, 'White Guys: Questioning Infinite Jest's New Sincerity', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5 (2017).

<sup>6</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Co., 2007)

<<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.liv.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cab0003a&AN=lvb.b2401271&site=eds-live&scope=site>>

Here, Wallace's short essay, 'Hail the Returning Dragon, Clothed in New Fire' (1996), is considered because of its odd perspective of a deadly epidemic that takes account only of heterosexual relations.<sup>7</sup> Wallace presents the reader with a picture of 'heterosexual AIDS' that views the onset of the disease as something to be welcomed and states 'that HIV could well be the salvation of sexuality in the 1990s' and that others tend not to see it in this way because they 'misread the eternal story of what erotic passion's all about' (Wallace, 'Hail', pp. 14-15). This is a controversial statement that deliberately sets out to avoid further controversy with its setting up of a consideration of AIDS under a heterosexual rubric. It is perhaps wise that Wallace took such a step, for discussions of HIV/AIDS at the time are largely influenced by misinformed views of the disease as primarily the concern of gay men. Discussing David Halperin's use of abjection whilst noting society's fondness for perceiving gay men as a threat where HIV/AIDS is concerned, Lauren Berlant notes that 'abjection is also a tactical response to gay men's embodiment of social abomination; a name for a sexual subjectivity organized more manifestly by risk than is the case for other more highly valued normative ones whose risks have tended to be romanticized and heroized' (Berlant, p. 266).<sup>8</sup> Berlant goes on to make obvious what she sees as the prevailing societal view of the time that 'queers are still so widely despised, so not fully legal, so heavily symbolized as a threat to the normal – in addition to the risk factors represented by HIV' (Berlant, p. 266). That Wallace goes out of his way to restrict his views on HIV/AIDs to a heterosexual context is perhaps wise in this instance, for to view the disease as something to be welcomed is insensitive given the negative press associated with HIV/AIDS, and gay men in particular.<sup>9</sup> And it is worth remembering that when this essay was first published the annual death toll from HIV/AIDS had only just peaked.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'Hail the Returning Dragon, Clothed in New Fire', in *Shiny Adidas Tracksuits and the Death of Camp: and other essays from Might magazine* (New York: Boulevard Books, 1998), pp. 7-14. Also to be found published as 'Back in New Fire', and 'The Perverse Blessing of AIDS', and 'Impediments to Passion', respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Lauren Berlant, 'Neither monstrous nor pastoral, but scary and sweet: Some thoughts on sex and emotional performance in Intimacies and What Do Gay Men Want?', in *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 19:2 (2009), pp. 261-273.

<sup>9</sup> See Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (1988), pp. 197-222, (p. 202).

<sup>10</sup> See Anon., A Timeline of HIV and AIDS.

Having negotiated one potential area of criticism, there are others to be answered. Indeed, Charles Nixon levels the following charge that:

The essay 'Back in New Fire' is a crucial part of understanding Wallace's cultural and political position. In many ways it reveals his approach to the issue of reconciling disillusionment with postmodernist theory, a desire for a return to more traditional values such as those espoused by Franzen... [T]he complicated space between post-postmodernism and feminism make Wallace's work on the issues around 'Back in New Fire' some of the most troubling of his career. Thus the essay is an important starting point for elucidating some of the conservative and anti-feminist rhetoric that can be seen throughout Wallace's writing.<sup>11</sup>

Nixon's perspective of Wallace's anti-feminist rhetoric offers a contrast with that of Holland and her claims of Wallace as capable of producing vociferously feminist essays. That Nixon feels the essay reveals aspects of Wallace's 'traditional values' perhaps stems from the opening of the essay where Wallace speaks in allegorical terms of a 'gallant knight', a 'dragon', and a 'fair maiden', a mythical representation of the hierarchy of gender, where man is active and willing to *face danger*, from which he expects to reap rewards, whilst woman is passive, for she is *in danger* and forever waiting to receive what man has to offer:

And so good Sir Knight comes tear-assing toward the castle, brandishing his lance. Can he just gallop up and carry the fair maiden off? Not quite. First he's got to get past the dragon, right? [...] But and so, like any loyal knight in the service of passion, the knight battles the dragon, all for the sake of the fair maiden. 'Fair maiden' means 'good-looking virgin', by the way. And so let's not be naïve about what the knight's really fighting for. [...] Sir Knight risks life and lance against the dragon not to 'rescue' the good-looking virgin, but to 'win' her. And any knight, from any era, can tell you what 'win' means here (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 14).

This passage fits with Nixon's assessment, though not Holland's, especially around the crude notion of a virgin waiting helplessly to be 'won'. However, what Wallace presents to the reader is a humorous parody of romantic love—the language used in this analogy disrupts conventional tropes of gender stereotypes. Though the majority of readers will be able to decode Wallace's

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Reginald Nixon. *The work of David Foster Wallace and post-postmodernism*. University of Leeds, 2013, p. 208.

euphemism of the knight's lance, he provides a further example to ensure that there is no confusion:

Let's go back to that knight and fair maiden exchanging lascivious looks. [...] Except imagine this time that there is no danger, no dragon to fear, face, fight, slay. [...] And here's the maiden inside, wearing a Victoria's Secret teddy and crooking her finger. Does anyone else here detect a shadow of disappointment in Sir Knight's face, a slight anticlimactic droop to his lance (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 15)?

With drooping lance in hand, said gallant knight is to be viewed as an object of ridicule, a man made impotent by the fair maiden's reversal of the situation – effectively representing what we might consider to be a feminist re-writing of the active/passive binary of the 'love story'. This disrupts notions of femininity and masculinity, which fits with Butler's claim that gender may well be the mechanism with which to disrupt gender 'norms'. Wallace's attention to language use, particularly around gender discourse, is precisely what this thesis sets out as of importance to critical readings. It is my assertion that Wallace's works are far from anti-feminist, and are certainly not always positioned alongside conservative ideology.

The main argument in Wallace's essay is that heterosexual AIDS is not 'a sexual Armageddon – a violent end to the casual carnal copia of the last three decades', nor is it 'a sort of test of our generation's sexual mettle' that positions 'casual sport-fucking as a kind of medical dare-devilry' (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 15). Instead, Wallace's essay views AIDS as the potential 'salvation of sexuality in the 1990s', and exhibits more tongue-in-cheek humour when asserting that with respect to HIV/AIDS and its 'impediment to human relations [...] [w]e shall overcome, so to speak' (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 15). To view AIDS as a form of salvation is naïve, even insensitive, yet not anti-feminist at this stage.<sup>12</sup> Wallace discusses the seemingly undeniable fact that '[a]ny animal can fuck', but that 'only humans can experience sexual passion' and that 'only the human will can defy, transgress, overcome, love: Choose' (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 15). Here, the history of 'nature and culture' lends opportunity to discuss 'impediments that

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<sup>12</sup> And is this Wallace suggesting HIV/AIDS is a form of salvation from casual sex? If so, we may consider Wallace's apparent distaste for casual sex a tad old-fashioned, however, it does provide a position from which to idealize meaningful, intimate contact between humans, arguably.

give the choice of passion its price and value' (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 15). Wallace lists the following impediments, as if conferring value, and it is crucial to our understanding of Wallace's choice of rhetoric to note the gender-specific impediments that serve to punish women, primarily:

[R]eligious proscriptions; penalty for adultery and divorce; chivalric chastity and courtly decorum; the stigma of illegitimate birth; chaperonage; madonna/whore complexes; syphilis; back-alley abortions; [...] from the automatic ruin of 'fallen' women to back seat tussles in which girlfriends struggled to deny boyfriends what they begged for in order to preserve their respect. Granted, from 1996's perspective, most of the old sexual dragons look stupid and cruel (Wallace, 'Hail', pp. 15-16).

Wallace notes a substantial list of impediments that nature and culture have been ingenious at erecting, which in 1996, following the sexual revolution of the 60s, he considers as stupid and cruel: the 'old dragons' should be cast aside. Yet the examples listed are precursors to HIV/AIDS, those dangers that used to keep casual sex under control, according to Wallace's essay, as if proffering a condensed commentary on the state of sexual relations and gender discourse in 1990's America. However, as Wallace continues the writing exhibits a more conservative viewpoint on sex and sexual relations when offering a fleeting history lesson that tells us that human sexuality 'has [always] been a deadly serious business', and that the only exception to this happens as 'the dragons all keeled over and died' following the '60s "Revolution" in sexuality' (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 16):

[S]ex, divorced from most price and consequence, reached a kind of saturation-point in culture – swinging couples and meat-market bars, hot tubs and EST, Hustler's gynecological spreads, Charlie's Angels, herpes, kiddie-pornography, mood rings, teenage pregnancy, Plato's retreat, disco [...]. [The] grim account of the emptiness and self-loathing that a decade of rampant casual fucking had brought on. Looking back, I realize that I came of sexual age in a culture that was starting to miss the very dragons whose deaths had supposedly freed it (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 16).

Conservative notions abound, where the main thrust of Wallace's essay becomes clear: that restrictions and impediments give sex meaning and 'value'. And it is evident in the chapters on Wallace's fiction that emptiness and a distinct dislike of the self haunt Wallace's characterization (e.g., Orin

Incandenza—*Infinite Jest*). Here, the voice Wallace uses is one that aligns with, and yearns for, the apparent sanctity of 'traditional', pre-1960s, no-deviation-from-the-norm, heterosexual sex, and seems to give no consideration to alternative ways of practicing one's sexuality.<sup>13</sup> There are obvious problems with this approach in that it remains exclusionary with respect to those practicing sexual activities outside of a heteronormative setting.

While there is a potential risk of homophobic sentiment, there is little in the way of anti-feminist rhetoric in Wallace's remarks. Indeed, there may exist a form of dialogue with which to engage if we consider that in listing 'impediments to passion' that affect woman disproportionately, this concurs with Jens Rydström's view that '[t]hose who enter the sexuality field through the gender door first set their eyes on centuries of gender subordination, of oppression and sexual exploitation of women'.<sup>14</sup> Wallace sets up such a viewpoint for the reader to engage with, and continues with a conservative, controversial, but not yet anti-feminist assessment of 'AIDS as a blessing [...] [T]he dragon is back, and clothed in a fire that can't be ignored' (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 16). AIDS is equated with the figure of the dragon. It is danger. It is death. It is an impediment that brings meaning back to sexual relations following the casualness of the 60's sex revolution, and in this respect the essay may be viewed as a retrospective criticism of that decade. Though Wallace affirms that he 'mean[s] no offence' in stating this, and does not consider a lethal epidemic to be a 'good thing', he juxtaposes his choice of topic with further instances of gender based inequality:

That hundreds of thousands of people are dying horribly of AIDS seems like a cruel and unfair price to pay for a new erotic impediment. But it's not obviously more unfair than the millions who have died of syphilis, incompetent abortions, and 'crimes of passion', nor obviously more cruel than that people used routinely to have their lives wrecked by 'falling', 'fornicating', sinning, having 'illegitimate' children, or getting trapped by inane religious codes in loveless and abusive marriages. At least it's not obvious to me (Wallace, 'Hail', pp. 16-17).

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<sup>13</sup> And here, Wallace's consideration of Peter Biskind's analysis of 1950's Hollywood films (later in this chapter) will offer an insight into a decade which perhaps provides the kind of sexual restraint Wallace's voice laments over (pre birth control).

<sup>14</sup> This is, of course, just one viewpoint from which to analyse gender relations. Jens Rydström, 'Gender, Power, and Sexuality: Crossroads in Sweden', in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10.2 (2004), pp. 273-275, (p. 275).



Consider the above list of items and their place in gender discourse. Though the language Wallace uses may appear universal, almost gender-neutral ('people'), the vast majority of the 'deaths' and 'wrecked lives' occur from 'impediments' that historically affect women—and in certain cases continue to affect women to this day.<sup>15</sup> Notions of 'falling' are still tied to Eve committing sin in the Garden of Eden. Incompetent abortions, having illegitimate children, and being trapped in loveless and abusive marriages, are, stereotypically, problems that women encounter. Again, by analyzing the juxtaposition Wallace sets up here, along with the impediments to passion discussed prior to this, the charge of anti-feminist rhetoric that Nixon accuses Wallace of seems confused. However, given the controversial tone of the essay, and careless phrases such as '[t]hanks to AIDS', and 'AIDS's gift to us', it is little wonder that Nixon finds Wallace's approach offensive and informed by bigotry (Wallace, 'Hail', p. 17). Aside from this, Wallace's use of language around this issue suggests a concern with the language and cultural forms that articulate gender, and an attempt to disrupt gender 'norms'.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.2 Wallace *qua* Social Commentator

Holland's assessment of Wallace's essay, 'Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think', a review of John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (1997), is that it is vociferously feminist.<sup>17</sup> However, I argue that it demonstrates Wallace's on-going concern with language use and gender discourse. Indeed, it is hard to gauge from the title just what Wallace aims to attempt in the review, and though there are aspects that are concordant with

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<sup>15</sup> And we may read this from multiple perspectives. Wallace may espouse an anti-feminist sentiment in lamenting that such impediments are no longer as much of an issue for women. Alternatively, Wallace may just be pointing out to the reader that it is women who are the casualties of such impediments, historically, thus affecting more of a feminist viewpoint.

<sup>16</sup> As seen in his engagement with Biskind's text in the previous chapter, and as will be shown later in this chapter with a consideration of Wallace's book reviews.

<sup>17</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think', in *Consider The Lobster And Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2011), pp. 51-59. John Updike, *Toward the End of Time: A Novel* (1997) (London: Random House, 2009).

feminist issues, the bulk is not; in fact, there are examples where Wallace's words are dismissive of feminist concerns around Updike's writing, though these follow on from what we might consider to be concerns raised around issues of gender discourse, and as a result are very subtle in their dismissal. During a general discussion of the 'Great Male Narcissists' (GMNs: Norman Mailer; Updike; and Philip Roth), as if clearing the ground for his own writing to follow, Wallace recalls female friends viewing Updike as 'the poor man *himself*', '[j]ust a penis with a thesaurus', and as someone who '[m]akes misogyny seem literary the same way Rush makes fascism seem funny' (Wallace, 'Certainly', pp. 51-2). The subtlety of Wallace's rejection of this thinking comes when discussing how these remarks (and 'worse ones' that Wallace chooses not to share) are 'all usually accompanied by the sort of facial expression where you can tell there's not going to be any profit in appealing to the intentional fallacy' (Wallace, 'Certainly', p. 53).

Firstly, the mention of the facial expressions that accompanies his female friends' rants on Updike suggests that they are not open to rational debate, and so we must be wary of whom the target(s) of this essay might be.<sup>18</sup> For example, Wallace tells us that *he* is not 'one of these spleen-venting spittle-spattering Updike haters one often encounters among literary readers under forty' (Wallace, 'Certainly', p. 52). Wallace positions himself outside of his female friends' 'feminist' reading of Updike by distancing himself from their viewpoints, while at the same time taking care not to defend Updike's approach. Though Wallace's language is not gendered when describing these 'literary readers', the only examples he offers up as being anti-Updike are those of his female friends, and so it is easy to make the link between the two and to view this as a typically stereotyped view of misandry emanating from Wallace's female friends: '[h]as the son of a bitch ever had one unpublished thought', they ask of Updike (Wallace, 'Certainly', p. 52). Instead, Wallace maintains the approach of social commentator on issues of gender discourse, as he provides a consideration not only of Updike *et al*, but also of the changing attitudes towards a generation of fiction writing that no longer seems relevant.

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<sup>18</sup> Those who attack or proffer opinion without considering the complexity of the issue?

Secondly, Wallace's mention of the intentional fallacy serves to dismiss this as an unworthy criticism of Updike: for he is the one accused of misogynistic thought (not his protagonists). Wallace states that when thinking about raising the issue of the intentional fallacy he is disinclined to do so because of his friends' facial expressions (spleen-venting and spittle-spattering). This is a subtle dismissal of feminist-inspired viewpoints, and though Wallace himself offers views on Updike's work that sound as if he adopts a feminist position, he then makes a rather pointed comment about his friends' observations when he states that they are part of a 'PC backlash' against the male literary tradition of the GMNs (Wallace, 'Certainly', p. 53). This hints that to be PC (a subject veiled by political correctness) is not necessarily a force for good, as it speaks of repercussive, 'knee-jerk' elements. For an example of this in an early 1990s context, see the earlier chapters detailing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's arrival at Amherst.

Additionally, when speaking of a writer like Updike who writes 'protagonists who are basically all the same guy [...] and though always heterosexual to the point of satyriasis, they especially don't love women' (and here Wallace offers a footnote giving examples of Updike's prose around the women he writes, one of which is the anatomical description of a woman's 'sacred several-lipped gateway', a fairly crass viewpoint), it is fair to say that any critic showing an interest in critiquing such subject matter is likely to produce something akin to a feminist enquiry of Updike's works (Wallace, 'Certainly', p. 53). Wallace circumvents obvious issues, instead offering oblique perspectives with which to consider gender relations. Once more, this alerts the reader to Wallace's pull towards gender discourse. Wallace notes a familiar concern that repeats throughout his own works of fiction and non-fiction, that of 'American loneliness', before discussing that the work is something of a departure for Updike into the 'futuristic, dystopian tradition', and summarizes the novel as follows:

What 95 percent of *Toward the End of Time* consists in is Ben Turnbull describing the predominate flora (over and over again as each season passes) and his brittle, castrating wife Gloria, and remembering the ex-wife who divorced him for adultery, and rhapsodizing about a young prostitute [...] and] Turnbull talking about sex and the imperiousness of the sexual urge, and detailing

how he lusts after assorted prostitutes and secretaries and neighbors and bridge partners and daughters-in-law and a girl who's part of the group of young toughs he pays for protection (Wallace, 'Certainly', p. 55).

This information, of stereotypes in a suburban setting, is ripe for feminist enquiry, yet Wallace sums up the content of the novel with 'hard statistical evidence', favouring objective figures over a subjective stance at this stage, informing the reader that it contains far more pages of descriptions of 'flora around Turnbull's New England home, plus fauna, weather, and how his ocean view looks in different seasons' ('86' pages), than it does of all the other arguably sexist, reductive, and potentially misogynistic elements of 'sexual loci' ('8.5' pages), 'Ben Turnbull's penis and his various thoughts and feelings about it' ('10.5' pages), and Ben Turnbull's free indirect discourse directly pertaining to women ('36.5' pages), which totals a mere fifty-five and a half pages—thirty pages fewer than the horticultural elements that Wallace describes as 'endless descriptions of every tree, plant, flower, and shrub around his [Turnbull's] home' (Wallace, 'Certainly', pp. 55-6). Notably, Wallace sidesteps the obvious issues with Updike's writing of 'sexual loci'. Here, Paul Giles sums up Wallace's efforts as: 'Wallace's point is that Updike's work has become increasingly narcissistic, ostensibly concerned with the state of America but really much more centered on the preoccupations of his fictional alter egos'.<sup>19</sup> Rather than merely focusing on Wallace's complaints of Updike's writings, Giles notes the ways that he sees Wallace's writing as differing from that of his literary peer. He begins with the claim that Updike's tendency is to take 'familiar human perspectives' before making (and not always successfully) larger claims about 'social and political contexts' (Giles, 'Sentimental', p. 333). Giles continues to offer a perspective on Wallace's writing method as one that 'starts with abstraction and then uses the human element to subvert rigid technocratic patterns', and this is precisely the claim in this thesis, that in focusing so clearly on issues of gender, though often from an unexpected viewpoint, Wallace does indeed destabilize the axioms that attempt to hold conventional notions of gender so firmly in place (Giles, 'Sentimental', p. 333).

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<sup>19</sup> Giles, Paul, 'Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 53 (2007), 327-344, (p. 333).

It is in this essay that Marshall Boswell sees a conflict in Wallace, where 'Wallace betrays his complex feelings about Updike and his influence on his own work'.<sup>20</sup> For prevalent in Wallace's essay is a lament for the 'sorts of sheer gorgeousness of his [Updike's] descriptive prose' that Wallace feels is missing from this novel, replaced instead by a 'clunky bathos [that] seems to have infected even the line-by-line prose, Updike's great strength for over forty years' (Wallace, 'Certainly', pp. 52, 57). According to Boswell, the conflict comes where Wallace 'sees a direct correlation between Updike's preoccupation with his Self and the long-standing charge against Updike of misogyny' evident in much of Updike's writing (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 44). Boswell continues by stating that 'in his dismissal of *Towards the End of Time* [Wallace] makes overt the same tacit argument that runs through *The Broom of the System*, namely that solipsistic, phallogocentric writing of the sort Updike is alleged to practice corresponds directly to the (false) belief that the Western novel is heading towards exhaustion and death (Boswell, *Understanding*, p. 44). Wallace, the self-confessed fan of Updike's works still manages to locate the most damaging aspects of his writings, lending a form of tension to this particular essay of Wallace's.

Arguably, Wallace is as concerned with Updike's novel seeming like 'a mean parody of John Updike' as he is with those elements that make for a fitting feminist enquiry, which makes his tone somewhat ironic given Holland's assessment of it as vociferously feminist (Wallace, 'Certainly', p. 58).<sup>21</sup> Speaking of Wallace's appreciation of Updike's prose style, and turning aside from Holland's essay for a moment, there exists a parody of Updike's work written by Wallace that first appeared in *Harper's Magazine*: 'Rabbit Resurrected' (1992).<sup>22</sup> Wallace offers a short, amusing story of Rabbit Angstrom at the end of his life, just as he is about to experience his own rebirth. Arguably, to write a convincing parody of another's work requires a good deal of familiarity with that work in the first instance. Wallace admits as much in the opening of his essay on Updike's novel, and there are elements of mockery from Wallace as he tries his

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<sup>20</sup> Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> And it must be noted that Holland does not offer an explanation as to why this particular essay of Wallace's should be considered as such.

<sup>22</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'Rabbit Resurrected', *Harper's* (1992), pp. 39-41.

hand at Updikean, cringe-worthy and offensive descriptions of women: 'Would there be vaginas where he was going, vaginas finally freed from the shrill silly vessels around them, bodiless, pungent, and rubicund, swaddled in angelic linen or straining plump around some Unitarian G- string?', which certainly brings an element of comically explicit parody to reductive themes of male heterosexuality (Wallace, *Harper's*, p. 40). There appears to be a concerted effort by Wallace to mimic Updike's prose, focusing here on self-absorption, as if the form of repetition itself emphasizes the narcissism present in Updike's fiction: 'The bright bed of happy unfeeling from which his son's straining face recedes has not deserted him, Rabbit Angstrom feels' (Wallace, *Harper's*, p. 39). The over-riding sense of egocentricity that accompanies the piece can be seen in the mock-Freudian imagery above, along with the seemingly unnecessarily convoluted descriptions that Wallace offers as Rabbit describes every minute detail around him.<sup>23</sup> There is also the portrayal of vision through closed eyes, with wondrous descriptive imagery, as if Wallace is offering a summary of a solipsist's heaven, where the focus is ever inward, offering little possibility for multiple perspectives to form.

Kate Roiphe defends the old GMNs against what she terms as the 'young or youngish male novelists', of which Wallace is included, and that for this new breed '[t]he current sexual style is more childlike; innocence is more fashionable than virility, the cuddle preferable to sex'.<sup>24</sup> Roiphe states that '[c]haracters in the fiction of the heirs apparent are often repelled or uncomfortable when faced with a sexual situation', and this claim appears just prior to a citing of *Infinite Jest* as proof that '[g]one the familiar swagger, the straightforward artistic revelling in the sexual act itself' (Roiphe). What is bizarre about Roiphe's assertion, other than the fact that she laments the loss of 'these older writers [Updike, Mailer, Roth], who want to defeat death with sex', and that she encourages the reader to think with fondness of their misogynistic ways, is that she chooses a work of Wallace's that contains at least one

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<sup>23</sup> A sentence beginning, 'How little the lyrical metaphors [...]', contains one hundred and sixty-six words, and is not unusual in its length (Wallace, *Harper's*, p. 39).

<sup>24</sup> Katie Roiphe, 'The Naked And The Conflicted - Sex And The American Male Novelist', *Nytimes.Com*, 2009 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/books/review/Roiphe-t.html>> [Accessed 2 December 2019].

character that is so hyper-sexualized that it affects his every impulse: Orin Incandenza (Roiphe).

Roiphe overlooks that one of the other characters to behave in a sexually predatory way, and at times with young students in her charge, is Orin's mother Avril. Equally, Roiphe overlooks the number of sex-obsessed characters in *Brief Interviews* (1999), where cuddling is far from the thoughts of most of the male characters that Wallace presents to the reader. Just as Holland labels Wallace's works as feminist, so Roiphe categorizes Wallace's characters as hampered by a 'postfeminist second-guessing' (Roiphe). Though there are issues with Holland's essay and its stance on what she calls Wallace's vociferously feminist essays, Holland does make apposite points around Wallace's texts. Holland presents her essay as a tool with which to further Wallace studies in the area of gender is both timely and significant in that she recognizes the fascination with gender relations that is evident throughout Wallace's *corpus*. Wallace's parody of Updike's prose style, mired as it is in the language of gender discourse and of gender relations, and the stereotypes that Updike's generation of writers relied on so heavily, seems to mark a moment of passing—as if something new is required of the writers who follow (writers such as Wallace). Indeed, Wallace speaks of this in his essay 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young'.<sup>25</sup> Here, Wallace not only sets his sights on the future of writing but also those writings from the past that seem to him to have been forgotten in the era of Creative Writing departments that simply do not account for, according to Wallace, the likes of 'Homer and Milton, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Maupassant and Gogol—to say nothing of the Testaments' (Wallace, 'Fictional', p. 50). Instead, Wallace complains that 'for far too much of this generation, Salinger invented the wheel, Updike internal combustion, and Carver, Beattie and Phillips drive what's worth chasing' (Wallace, 'Fictional', pp. 50-1). This marks Wallace apart from those writers, as a person who wishes still to consider important topics, which I contend to be issues of gender for the purposes of this thesis.

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<sup>25</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 8.3 (1988), 36-53.

Further evidence of Wallace's concern with gender discourse comes from Peter Biskind's *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (1983), a book taken from the personal library of David Foster Wallace: a collection of books that forms part of the Wallace archive held at The Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.<sup>26</sup> Part Three of Biskind's book, 'Male and Female', where the bulk of the underlining and annotations made by Wallace are found, acts as a source that validates my claim that the language around gender discourse and of gender relations is of real concern to Wallace. Indeed, the annotations Wallace makes in the margins of Biskind's text, along with the extensive underlining of passages, serve to demonstrate his own awareness of gender hybridity. Here, Wallace demonstrates a substantial engagement with issues of gender. Furthermore, both prior to this section of Biskind's book and in the sections that follow, very little exists in the way of Wallace's handwritten notes (Wallace always used pen and ink to underline and annotate, never pencil, giving a sense of permanence to such efforts). The chapters found in Part Three ("Male and Female") stand out as being of particular interest to Wallace, evidenced by the amount of interaction that can be seen via his notes and underlining of the text. John Roache's work on Wallace's personal library and marginalia within, will be considered alongside Maria Bustillo's now infamous article on what she found in the Wallace archives.<sup>27</sup>

Biskind's approach to a reading of 1950's Hollywood films is to argue against a familiar feminist strand of thought. Using Betty Friedan's work as an example, Biskind suggests that women are not merely to be viewed as victims of patriarchy during the period, but that they have agency, power, and even a certain amount of control over patriarchy. Biskind goes on to state that '[m]asculinity [...] cannot be taken for granted. Men are made, not born' (Biskind, p. 262). According to Biskind, then, masculinity is not fixed and gender is fluid, and he continues by asking if the women of the time are to be viewed

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Biskind, *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us To Stop Worrying And Love The Fifties* (USA: Random House, 1983). Subsequent in text references will give a page number and 'annotation' to the side to note Wallace's interaction with the text.

<sup>27</sup> Maria Bustillos, 'Inside David Foster Wallace's Private Self-Help Library', *The Awl*, 5 (2011); John Roache, 'The Realer, More Enduring and Sentimental Part of Him': David Foster Wallace's Personal Library and Marginalia', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5 (2017).



‘more like men?—or more like women, that is to say, still more ‘feminine’, seductive, mothering, and so on?’ (Biskind, p. 263). This approach calls into question notions of masculinity and femininity, those culturally formed labels, arguably, that guide society with respect to what it is to be a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’. Above Biskind’s text at this point, in Wallace’s handwriting, is the following: ‘Women ‘controlled’, confined to roles within domesticity and culture, but within these roles become agents, feminizing and childizing men – PARADOX’ (Biskind, p. 263 - annotation).<sup>28</sup> Wallace grasps the conflicting cultural messages that can be gleaned from some Hollywood films of the 1950s, where women, having proved most useful during the war years in jobs and roles that had culturally been viewed as the preserve of men, were then herded into the home and tied to the domestic: again, establishing Holland’s view that Wallace is capable of feminist enquiry, and my view that his writing is informed by gender discourse. However, contrasting viewpoints exist in this area where the notes and marginalia of an author are concerned. Indeed, Roache contends that ‘Bustillos’ reading of the self-help marginalia [seem to] reinforce[e] the conventional critical understanding of authorly annotations as a form of personal revelation or truth, and, by extension, as a kind of allegorical key to the respective literary oeuvre’, whereas Roache questions the ‘link between marginalia and authenticity, manuscripture and mind, which the subsequent controversy [arising from Bustillos’ article] has done little to dispel’ (Roache, ‘The Realer’, pp. 5. 7). The argument presented in this thesis is not one of author intention, but rather Wallace’s repeated return to issues of gender—reflected in both his fiction and non-fiction.

In a discussion of Olivia deHavilland in *The Snake Pit* (1948), Biskind states that the lesson of the film is that women must be controlled (a sentence underlined by Wallace). This is a notion that Wallace is seen to engage with in *The Broom of the System*, where Rick and Dr Jay attempt to control Lenore, unsuccessfully (see *Broom* chapter). Biskind goes on: ‘It wasn’t only a question of encouraging women to leave their wartime factory jobs and re-enter the home; even when they were in the home they were difficult. Hysterical,

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<sup>28</sup> The figure from Wallace’s fiction that best fits this description is Avril Incandenza, though Avril subverts notions of what a ‘woman’s role’ should be (see *Infinite Jest* chapter).

emotional, irrational’ (Biskind, p. 265). Biskind refers to Olivia receiving ‘a stiff dose of therapy’, and moves to discuss the need for ‘women to function as social-control agents themselves’—ideas of therapy are recurrent themes, as shown in the chapters detailing Wallace’s fiction (Biskind, p. 265). Again, having the text underlined and annotated by Wallace helps in our understanding of Wallace’s knowledge of the cultural determinants of the time, which ensure that men are seen to be acting as men, and women as women. One example of this is Ernest Dichter’s influential hold on the American advertising and marketing industries.<sup>29</sup>

Biskind duly notes Dichter’s efforts, and Friedan’s objections to such, and of how Dichter’s belief was that ‘weak women made poor consumers’ (Biskind, p. 266). He notes that Dichter advocates a ‘centrist course’ to his clients (Procter & Gamble, Exxon, Chrysler, General Mills and DuPont are just a few examples), one that emphasizes the importance of aiming for the ‘middle-of-the-road Balanced Homemaker’ who resides somewhere between the ‘passive, conservative True Housewife’ and the ‘equally bad bet’ of the ‘Career Woman’ (Biskind, p. 266). This theme is considered later in a discussion of Avril Incandenza in the chapter on *Infinite Jest* and once more this links back with Sedgwick’s discussion of the issues that women face when leaving mainstream education to enter the workforce, a place rife with gender inequality. The aim of such marketing, according to Biskind, is to assert that ‘[t]he managerial mother was a career woman after all; it’s just that her career was the home and the family’ (Biskind, p. 266).<sup>30</sup> In the face of such biased, sexist views, it is hardly surprising that Friedan chooses to take Dichter to task in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), for persuading advertisers to start ‘exploiting [women’s] homemaking insecurities in order to keep them in the kitchen with such gal pals as Betty Crocker and Aunt Jemima’ (*The Economist*).<sup>31</sup> This highlights just how important the 1950s are in the shaping of contemporary notions of gender that follow, whether through the representation of gender relations in 1950’s Hollywood films or via the propaganda of the advertising and marketing

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<sup>29</sup> Anon., *Retail Therapy*, <http://www.economist.com/node/21541706> (*The Economist*, 2011) [Accessed 2 Dec 2019].

<sup>30</sup> It is certainly apparent that Avril Incandenza applies management strategies in her approach to motherhood, unsuccessfully at times.

<sup>31</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2010).

machine. This was surely not lost on Wallace, because Avril Incandenza is written as one who occupies just such a position within her family, and yet she is not tied solely to this way of being, for Avril is complex in character (see *Infinite Jest* chapter).

The rate at which Wallace annotates and underlines the text increases; in fact, Wallace underlines an entire paragraph, from which the following is taken: 'Friedan to the contrary, families in fifties films were often matriarchies. Within these families, women were charged with no less than the task of transmitting the values of civilization' (Biskind, pp. 266-7). Biskind takes a Foucaultian approach, emphasising the power that he feels women possess within the patriarchal structure, highlighting the potential influence matriarchy wields in terms of shaping civilisation's future.<sup>32</sup> Again, the most obvious engagement with issues of matriarchy in Wallace's fiction is found in Avril Incandenza's character, though this is troublesome and complicated to say the least (see *Infinite Jest* chapter). Below this paragraph, Biskind lists those female actors that he views as embodying their roles as 'priestesses of principle': Edie Doyle, Ingrid Bergman, Jennifer Jones, Eva Marie Saint, Ida Lupino, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Wyman, and Katherine Hepburn (Biskind, p. 267). Here, Wallace forms a curly bracket around the entirety of the paragraph, to which he adds: WOMEN > MEN N 50's (Biskind, p. 267 – annotation). The symbol that he uses between women and men is a curious one, and could be read in a number of ways, but perhaps the most useful, and appropriate given the context of Biskind's approach, along with Wallace's background in mathematics, is the symbol that indicates 'greater than'. Again, this validates the view of Wallace as a writer fascinated with gender and gender relations, and my assertion of Wallace's interest in gender discourse.

Roache seems to disagree with such an approach when stating that '[i]f Wallace's library seems to offer a privileged insight into who he 'really was inside', then it does so strictly within this pattern of hope and self-delusion,

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<sup>32</sup> The writings of Foucault are familiar to Wallace and it is likely that Wallace too made the connection between Biskind's argument and Foucault's thoughts on power relations; in fact, in his short essay, 'Greatly Exaggerated', Wallace mentions Foucault on five separate occasions (mostly in connection to what Wallace views as the 'poststructuralist metacritics'), and quotes Foucault twice in a discussion of H. L. Hix's criticism of post-structuralism ('Greatly', pp. 138-45). David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never do again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009).

whereby a procession of ‘different models through which to see the problem’ are eventually, and fatally, recognized as so many clichés (Wallace then looks ‘like almost everybody else then in their late twenties who’d made some money or had a family or whatever they thought they wanted and still didn’t feel that they were happy’; 142) (Roache, ‘Realer’, p. 16). However, there is a distinction between Roache’s aims and the aim of this thesis in that Roache primarily focuses on the ‘self-help’ books from Wallace’s library, and thus the notion that reading Wallace’s marginalia and notes can offer some sort of insight into the mind of Wallace is of course moot in that sense. Again, where this thesis differs is that it is not concerned with what Wallace thought on such matters, but on the instances where gender discourse is highlighted in a text such as Biskind’s. This also contrasts with Bustillo’s focus, which seems ever to remain on the way in which the ‘books from his personal library, most of them annotated, some heavily as if he were scribbling a dialogue with the author page by page’, seem to indicate the author’s intent, according to Bustillo (Bustillo, ‘Inside’, Web). Bustillo’s position is fraught with pitfalls and is not the one adopted in this thesis. However, if there is a signal that Bustillos’ article resonates with this thesis it is in her claim that ‘Wallace seemed always to be trying to erase the distance between himself and others in order to understand them better, and trying visibly to make himself understood—always asking questions, demanding to know more details’ (Bustillos, ‘Inside’, Web). Bustillos’ assertion fits with the claims of this thesis that this is what Wallace is doing in his engagement with gender discourse—questioning conventional notions of gender.

Where women are deemed to be less good, or in need of reminding of their place in society, Biskind asserts that men will fulfil this role as agents of social control, as women’s ‘friends, teachers, social workers, but most often doctors’ (Biskind, p. 267). In a further paragraph that Wallace encloses with a curly bracket, Biskind discusses the role of doctors and their efforts to keep women ‘civilized’ by ‘ministering’, ‘psychoanalyzing’, ‘soothing’, and ‘educating’ them in their errant ways—Wallace engages with aspects of psychoanalysis, via notions of therapy, in much of his fiction, most notably in his debut novel with the figures of Dr Jay and Lenore Beadsman, and so a further link to his writing is

evident (Biskind, p. 268). However, Biskind subverts the doctors' role by suggesting that '[t]his collection of male doctors might as well have been women, because they stand for nurturant values that these films ascribe to women. And even in these instances, women doctor the doctors, teach the teachers' (Biskind, p. 268). In a Foucaultian sense, Biskind elevates women's position in society by displacing conventional notions of the balance of power that exists between men and women in patriarchal society: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. [...] These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network' (Foucault, p. 95).<sup>33</sup> Foucault's thoughts on power offer the chance for multiple perspectives to form, and it will be shown that such thinking sheds light on Wallace's engagement with gender discourse and gender relations throughout his fiction, and my assertion that this is where Wallace's texts disrupt conventional notions of gender.

Biskind's text highlights the relational nature of the balance of gendered power, and again there is evidence of the complicated dynamics of power that Foucault addresses in *History of Sexuality*, where power is never a straightforward concept of one party wielding absolute power over another. Indeed, Biskind makes this clear (Wallace underlines):

But, as we saw in *Blackboard Jungle*, the relationship between the dominant patriarchy and the subordinate matriarchy is dialectical. Patriarchy is strengthened by strengthening, not weakening, matriarchy. Men were strengthened by strengthening, not weakening, women. Still, power over home, family, and quality of life may have been delegated power, but it was power nonetheless (Biskind, p. 274).

A sweeping statement from Biskind follows, marked strongly by Wallace (the lines are definite and the ink dark, showing the strength of hand applied): 'The transformation of the American character that preoccupied the fifties, the feminization of men and the masculinization of women, was clearly evident at the time. Everyone [...] agreed that sex roles were changing' (Biskind, p. 274). As sex roles undergo a period of change during the 50s, once more there is the

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<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History Of Sexuality. Volume 1. The Will to Knowledge*, Translated By Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

potential for conventional notions of gender to be destabilized, and for a sense of the fluidity of gender to take root.

Biskind's sub-heading to this chapter is '*Mildred Pierce* and the Feminist Mistake' and begins by stating that, '[h]ers [Mildred's] is the kind of success story that would have been applauded in most conservative films, like this one, had Mildred been a man. But what was good for men was rarely good for women, and Mildred is punished for her career' (Biskind, p. 296). Mildred, according to Biskind, is punished for her success simply because she is a woman. Wallace underlines the entirety of the second paragraph, from which the following is taken:

Conservative films didn't like career women any better than pluralist films did; in both, women had to return to the home. [...] [W]omen were not lured into the home with a 'deal', which allowed them to exercise social control over men. Rather, they were expected to subordinate themselves to men inside the home as well as outside, and not just to any old men, but to traditional, strong, conservative men (Biskind, p. 296).

Biskind appears to describe a Friedan-inspired landscape for women, where subordination rules—the pliant cream-puff imagery of Friedan's that he rejects earlier. Where Biskind derides Friedan for her assessment of gender relations in previous chapters, he now seems to agree that in conservative films there exists a message that speaks of the need for total control over a woman's life, lest she rupture the fabric of society. Biskind continues (Wallace underlines):

Ambitious, overprotective Mildred was a case study in 'momism', a phrase coined by conservative social critic Philip Wylie in his 1942 best seller *A Generation of Vipers*. 'Megaloid momworship has got completely out of hand', Wylie wrote in his inimitable style. 'Our land, subjectively mapped, would have more silver cords and apron strings criss-crossing it than railroads and telephone wires. Disguised as good old mom, dear old mom, sweet old mom, your loving mom, and so on, she is the bride at every funeral and the corpse at every wedding' (Biskind, p. 297).

Wylie's assessment of a certain kind of mother is particularly damning, and the dangers around 'moms' and 'momworship' put forth are designed to promote panic in conservative men (*Infinite Jest's* Avril Incandenza is referred to as 'the Moms'). Gender paranoia is taking hold around notions of the mother—as a figure of comfort becomes a figure of threat. Biskind reads the death of

Mildred's child, Kay, as a 'danger sign', a warning that Mildred has 'wandered onto dangerous ground—female sexuality, on the one hand, and man's world, on the other' (Biskind, p. 298). Wallace underlines this sentence, and below a footnote where Biskind explains that '[c]hildren's deaths were often used in films of the fifties to underscore parental dereliction', Wallace writes the following (Biskind, p. 298): 2 TABOOS FOR WOMEN – 1 FEMALE SEXUALITY; 2 MALE WORLD (Biskind, p. 298 – annotation). Wallace recognizes the restrictions imposed upon women in this conservative film. In his use of the word 'taboos', a word that Biskind does not use in his reading of *Mildred Pierce*, Wallace shows awareness of control factors inherent in the film's message, with respect to gender relations—in this instance, those things which are viewed as forbidden for women.

Biskind concludes the chapter on *Mildred Pierce* by summarising the effect of gender bias (Wallace underlines the entire paragraph), making evident the impossibility of Mildred's situation in a male-led, conservative society taught to fear strong, independent women:

Like so many conservative films, *Mildred Pierce* is AC/DC, torn between left and right, and therefore Mildred gets it coming and going. [...] On the one hand, it chastises Mildred for her sexualization, for giving way to her libido, nature within. On the other, it attacks her for being too hard, tough, masculine, insufficiently feminine and natural. Ultimately, the film opts for rigid gender distinctions, the traditional family, and rejects the therapeutic (Biskind, p. 304).

Wallace's extensive underlining of Biskind's text, around gender hybridity as a concept brought about by gender discourse, focuses on issues connected with gender relations and the way narratives simultaneously reinforce and question gender roles. Wallace's texts are infused with knowledge of gender discourse and an interest in gender relations, and the cultural imperatives that seek to keep such relations confined within strict definitions. There is opportunity to view Wallace's works as an extension of the type of cultural commentary that seeks to understand the hypocrisy of such representations, while also destabilizing them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> And again, the treatment of Avril Incandenza in Wallace's text seems more and more to reflect the experiences of Mildred Pierce (see *Infinite Jest* chapter).

Wallace engaging with issues of gender discourse and of gender relations overlaps with other interests of his—namely the pervasiveness of the visualized imagery of film and television. The final lines of the ‘Male and Female’ section of Biskind’s book are underlined, giving an indication that this is a text Wallace is reading with a view to writing the essay, ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’ (1993): ‘New conventions replaced the old, but despite all that *Dr Strangelove* showed us about the klunky machinery of genre, we continued to believe what we saw’ (Biskind, p. 348).<sup>35</sup> Wallace was of the opinion that visualized images are key in shaping what a nation believes: ‘If we want to know what American normality is—what Americans want to regard as normal—we can trust television. For television’s whole *raison* is reflecting what people want to see’ (Wallace, ‘Unibus’, p. 152). Gender ‘traits’ and behaviour, evident in 1950’s Hollywood and to this very day, perpetuate through cultural pastimes of film and television. People believe what they see, and if what they see is a conservative view of gender relations, then that will influence the ways in which they conduct their lives. This is further complicated by the fact that Wallace complicates notions of seeing—most evident in the discussions of Joelle van Dyne, and of Hugh/Helen Steeply in the chapter on *Infinite Jest*.

The most fitting character of Wallace’s to mention is Avril Incandenza (*Infinite Jest*), also known as ‘the Moms’—a plural that stands for the singular (another disruption of convention similar to Wallace’s ‘E Unibus Pluram’). In Wallace’s consideration of Biskind’s text and the extensive underlining and annotation of the text in the margins, particularly in relation to the chapter on *Mildred Pierce*, there is a vision of woman that requires control lest she destroy humanity with her errant femininity. Bustillos makes a direct comparison between Avril Incandenza and Wallace’s own mother, based upon her findings at the Wallace archive:

It will not come as news to any reader of *Infinite Jest* that Wallace had some complicated and deep-seated issues with regard to the subject of motherhood generally. The relationship between Hal and Avril Incandenza is to some degree a

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<sup>35</sup> David Foster Wallace, ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and US fiction’. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): pp. 151-. Wallace’s reversing of the national slogan offers an ironic view of entertainment, that there is indeed only ever a single source with no real variety, but also, in tandem with my approach in this thesis, that many (perspectives) may arise from a single source.



replay, one could not help but think, of the author's relationship to his own mother. Hal is so obviously a projection of Wallace himself: a tennis player, a prodigy, a gifted writer, a brilliant intellect. Thoughtful and kind, but fake, empty inside. Mute. Unable to feel (Bustillos, 'Inside', Web).

And here, Bustillo backs up this assertion by likening Wallace to Hal with the following claim: '[w]ell, all of that emptiness, muteness and monstrosity is suggested in the markings that appear in his copy of [Alice] Miller's book' (Bustillos, 'Inside', Web). Bustillos appears confident in pathologizing Wallace via the marginalia and notes found in his personal library, but once more this all stems from the self-help books to which she refers to throughout the article, and thus Roache's rejection of her claims seems valid. And in this respect Roache attempts to make clear that his intention 'is not so much to consolidate these often generically and politically diverse discourses under the same broad heading of ('bad') self-help, as to emphasize their steadily homogenizing assimilation into a popular discourse of diagnosis/cure – or self-ignorance/self-revelation – that develops largely in accordance with its commercial appeal' (Roache, 'Realer', p. 17). The fact that Roache feels that self-help books and the principles within are now so embedded in the collective psyche of modern society leads naturally to a suspicion of claims such as that of Bustillos, and so caution must be advised. But again, Roache is only ever referring to self-help books in his article, whereas this thesis is taking a wider approach in relation to Biskind's text—Wallace is making notes and underlining instances of conventional notions of gender, and their effects upon society (as set out by Biskind).

Remnants of essentialist thinking are visible in Wallace's *corpus*, yet there is opportunity to view this as a form of social commentary rather than as an affirmation of such values. For instance, in *Broom of the System* (1986) there are issues of control and power between Lenore and the men around her; in *Infinite Jest* (1996) Avril and Joelle—two very different representations of women that also speak of issues connected with gender relations and the interplay of power and control; in *Brief Interviews* (1999) the notion of power and control becomes even more disturbing as it sits at the extreme end of the

spectrum of gender relations; and finally, in *The Pale King* (2011) Toni Ware and her experience of the dynamics of power, also disturbing at times, between men and women. In his reading and interaction with Biskind's text Wallace not only shapes his attitude to the fiction he will go on to write, but also continues to formulate ideas on gender, on the performance and repertoire of gender, and on gender relations.

Holland's assertion that gender is an unexplored area of Wallace's *corpus* seems pertinent once more, but not necessarily that this always speaks of Wallace conducting a meditation on masculinity. Indeed, there is an occasion where Holland conflates Wallace with one of his male characters. Holland notes an instance in an interview with David Lipsky where Wallace 'compares himself as a lover to the pathologically narcissistic Orin', before going on to state that 'it is [...the] clear and persistent concern with [...] the ways in which primarily female selves and bodies are manipulated by men like himself [Wallace] – that is to say like Updike, like Orin, like even the men at the AVN Awards – that best distinguishes his work as “feminist”' (Holland, pp. 73-4). There is an accusatory tone in Holland's remarks, and in her captioning of the word feminist in inverted commas, insinuating an uneasy alliance with feminism that she sees in Wallace's works. The following reading of 'Big Red Son' serves to problematize Holland's views of the schematized stereotypes she refers to ('manipulating' men and 'victimized' women) within the pornography industry, and later, the chapter on *Infinite Jest* will complicate Holland's conflation of Wallace *qua* Orin.

### 3.3 Wallace on the Pornography Industry

Wallace's tendency to adopt provocative perspectives can also be seen in his essay on the pornography industry, 'Big Red Son', and is an account of a visit to the AVN (*Adult Video News*) Awards: an event dubbed the Academy Awards of pornography. It was originally published in the September 1998 issue of *Premiere* magazine as 'Neither Adult Nor Entertainment' under the pseudonyms Willem R. deGroot and Matt Rundlet, and was subsequently reprinted in Wallace's essay collection, *Consider the Lobster* (2005). *Premiere*, no longer in

print in the U.S., was known for its long-form movie journalism. On the September '98 cover is a youthful looking Drew Barrymore, along with recognizable names from the world of mainstream cinema. Immediately, tension arises between the magazine and the article itself—mainstream cinema rarely wants to associate with what pornography industry insiders often refer to as 'Hollywood's Evil Twin [... or, its] Big Red Son', the title of which implies a collective cultural repression of something that must remain out of sight (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 5).

Holland's appraisal of the essay as vociferously feminist may stem from Wallace's statement that '[f]eminists of all different stripe oppose the adult industry for reasons having to do with pornography's putative effects on women' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 18).<sup>36</sup> Though Wallace recognizes that differing forms of feminism exist, his assertion is incorrect—not all feminists are anti-pornography.<sup>37</sup> Writing under a pseudonym Wallace conducts a form of social commentary by observing the workings of the pornography industry. On the occasions where Wallace deviates from this style of writing the voice he uses is sanctimonious and moralizing, at best, and largely influenced by stereotypes. Given that Wallace is writing under a pseudonym may suggest a form of strategy in terms of argument. Wallace's concern with issues of exploitation and the harms of working within the pornography industry applies equally to the men as it does to the women of this industry, and so an assessment of this essay as being vociferously feminist must allow for this, and thus destabilizes Holland's previous assertions about male rage and female self-loathing.

'Big Red Son' begins with a dedication to 'the 30+ testosteronically afflicted males whose cases [of 'auto-castration'] have been documented in the past two years' (fifteen incidents per year is far from an epidemic) (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 3). There is an odd reaction to the article, where the most vitriolic responses come from within *AVN* itself. A brief selection of the criticisms follow: Paul Fishbein, *AVN*'s President, calls the article 'a shoddy piece of journalism,

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<sup>36</sup> In Holland's use of feminist the expectation is that the focus remain on the female, whereas Wallace's essay considers gender relations, a far more neutral concept.

<sup>37</sup> For an example of this refer to Gayle Rubin, 'Blood Under The Bridge: Reflections On "Thinking Sex"', *GLQ: A Journal Of Lesbian And Gay Studies*, 17.1 (2010), 15-48. Rubin discusses at length the Barnard Sex Conference of 1982 that culminated in the 'Feminist Sex Wars' that was effectively a battle between pro-pornography and anti-pornography feminists.

rife with errors and innuendo'; Rebecca Gray, Associate Editor, says, 'I find it reprehensible, your thesis statement about the Snuff Film being the guide for modern pornography [...] is exactly th[e] kind of moralizing attitude which degrades the performers in pornography, [but does not account for] the fact that pornography is becoming more acceptable all the time'; and finally, Mark Kernes, Features Editor, responds: 'understanding "complexity" is certainly not your writers' strong point. I only hope that they someday can come to the pornography industry with open minds, and leave their "sin" concepts at the door'.<sup>38</sup> This highlights the sensitivity of the topic Wallace deals with, and speaks of Wallace's tendency to write provocatively. Though Wallace's essay utilizes innuendo for comedic effect in its approach, and talks of pornography's probable *telos* being the snuff film (influenced heavily, at times, by conservative notions of sin), its initial concern is on the undesirable elements of capitalism.

No sooner are the essay's dedicatees mentioned than the essay considers the Academy Awards and mainstream cinema as major industries within the U.S., with a particular focus on the Academy Awards whose 'notorious commercialism and hypocrisy disgust many of the millions and millions and millions of viewers who tune in during prime time to watch the presentations', which implicitly aligns Wallace's discussion of pornography with the 'mainstream' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 4). As a piece of journalism it is not objective at this stage, but rather biased in its own presentation, invoking a kind of universalism with which to ensnare the reader:

We pretty much all tune in, despite the grotesquerie of watching an industry congratulate itself on its pretense that it's still an art form, of hearing people in \$5,000 gowns invoke lush clichés of surprise and humility scripted by publicists [...] but we all still seem to watch. To care. [...] That [...] celebrity culture is rushing to cash in and all the while congratulating itself on pretending not to cash in. Underneath it all, though, we know the whole thing sucks (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 4).

After this diatribe Wallace 'humbly offer[s] an alternative', and the focus turns to the Annual *Adult Video News Awards*, which is arguably an imitation of the Academy Awards and an alternative to conventional celebrity culture, in that it

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<sup>38</sup> Nick Maniatis, 'AVN's Response To "Neither Adult Nor Entertainment"', *Thehowlingfantods.Com* <<http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/avn.htm>> [Accessed 2 December 2019].

does not generally appear in mainstream circulation (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 4). The U.S. adult-film industry is compared with mainstream American cinema, with an assessment of annual gross turnover leaving the adult-film industry the clear winner according to Wallace, with almost double the turnover of mainstream cinema (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 5). Wallace reiterates the point that the industry is 'big, big business', before undercutting the comment with a brief consideration of the psychological damage that arises as a result of working within the industry. When mentioning a selection of the suicides that occur, Wallace does not discriminate between men and women, which, like the auto-castration dedication is an unusual approach (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 8). The essay is deliberately void of sexual content at this point, and in doing so the comparison between the mainstream Hollywood and its 'Big Red Son' is strengthened.

It is twelve pages into the essay when events that may spark feminist enquiry are brought to light. The reader learns that one of producer/director Max Hardcore's 'girls is squatting on the countertop masturbating with the butt of a riding crop', while promotional posters of Hardcore's films advertise: 'SEE PRETTY GIRLS SODOMIZED IN MANNERS MOST FOUL! SEE CUM-SPLATTERED GIRLS TOO STUPID TO KNOW BETTER!' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 12). This raises issues of exploitation, yet Wallace offers no further comment, again indicating a strategy of avoiding obvious topics. Wallace continues to report in the manner of social commentator, and therefore the mention of potential exploitation should not be mistaken as emanating from a feminist viewpoint. So far, then, this is not the 'merciless look at the still shocking ways in which the pornography industry objectifies women physically and psychically', that Holland suggests (Holland, p. 70). Additionally, Holland's blanket assumption that the pornography industry is symptomatically anti-women, in the damage it causes, does not account for the power that pornography's top female performers possess.

Wallace's essay makes note of this when discussing the 'contract players' who are tied to 'one particular production company', and that on average women stay in the industry no more than two years (Wallace, 'BRS', pp. 12, 15). The latter of these factoids appears just prior to Wallace's oblique mention of

Susan Faludi's article on the pornography industry: 'The Money Shot' (1995).<sup>39</sup> Wallace references the article on a number of occasions without referring to it or its author by name, and his tone suggests that he does not care for the article, which is arguably more feminist than Wallace's essay (as an aside, Holland bemoans the fact that the 'only nonfiction book by an acknowledged feminist writer contained in the [...] archive of Wallace's library is one by Susan Faludi'<sup>40</sup> (Holland, p. 74)) (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 15). Faludi asserts that the pornography industry 'is one of the few contemporary occupations where the pay gap operates in women's favor', before explaining the way in which contract players capitalize on the high earnings a top female performer commands (Faludi, 'Money', p. 65). Faludi's article argues that the pornography industry has become feminized, suggesting a power shift away from the men and towards the women of the industry—and that the men's power within the industry is diminishing (particularly those male newcomers who wish to serve as future pornography stars). Faludi's balanced, feminist, and feminizing view of the pornography industry largely stands in contrast to that of anti-pornography feminists. The exception to this, Faludi notes, is the B-girl or 'fill-in girl' who, though expendable, still rates much higher than the male newcomers (Faludi, 'Money', p. 70).

Where Wallace mentions ill treatment of women in the pornography industry that is suspect and misogynistic, it is always with reference to the B-girls, yet there are not many examples of this in the essay. Two such occasions involve members of the pornography industry retelling stories in front of Wallace, and as such cannot be verified for their accuracy. The first example is told to Wallace in the hotel suite of Max Hardcore, a director of 'Gonzo'

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<sup>39</sup> Susan Faludi, 'The Money Shot', *Newyorker.Com*, 1995

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1995/10/30/the-money-shot>> [Accessed 2 December 2019].

<sup>40</sup> The book in question is *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), which broadly takes the view that the men who returned from WWII are disproportionately affected by a shift in gender dynamics (thus fitting in with Biskind's view on the 1950s as central to the development of gender relations). There is in Wallace's copy of Faludi's book yet another example of Wallace's familiarity of the concept of gender fluidity to be found. It is an annotation by Wallace: "Femininity in masculinity" (Faludi, *Stiffed*, p. 38 – annotation). This appears at the head of a page with extensive underlining, where Faludi discusses the changes in American economic activity from an industry base to a service base, and that much of what are considered to be masculine qualities are actually qualities that are found in 'women as the essence of motherhood', which reinforces a view of gender fluidity (Faludi, *Stiffed*, p. 38). And odd that Holland should only accuse Wallace of using feminist enquiry to conduct a 'meditation on masculinity' when it also appears to be what Faludi is actually doing with her text. Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: W. Morrow and Company, 1999).

pornography (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 25). It involves Max and a crewman discussing a 'little girl' who accepts their invitation to return to the MAXWORLD Trailer for 'some face-fucking and reaming her asshole and, like, your standard depravities' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 31). They then go on to present Wallace with a notebook in which is written, 'I'm a little fuckhole' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 31). These words are written, allegedly, after giving the 'girl' a Magic Marker and persuading her to 'stick it up her asshole' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 31). The second example involves Wallace overhearing a conversation at a urinal during the AVN Awards, where '[o]ne performer turned-auteur is telling a colleague about an exciting new project' involving a Russian 'chick like nineteen [who] can't speak a word of English' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 47). The colleague is said to have encouraged the director to 'get in there. Just one scene. Nineteen, no English. Probably got a butthole about this big [illustrative gesture unseen because auditor is still standing complexly traumatized at urinal]' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 47). Wallace's approach is akin to 'gonzo' journalism, where objectivity is not necessarily the driving force behind the reporting—instead, the questioning of conventional orthodoxy is the goal.

Wallace's descriptions of events may be elaborated upon for comedic effect, and there is much about Wallace's 'essay' that does not reflect the fact that it was initially commissioned as a piece of reportage by *Premiere* magazine. For instance, there is the article's dedication to the handful of people who auto-castrate each year, as stated earlier. This sense of playfulness (and inappropriateness) on Wallace's behalf posits pornography as a possible solution to the problem, which is too late for those who have auto-castrated, and also improbable for those struggling with 'sexual urges [that] had become a source of intolerable conflict and anxiety' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 3). This may act as a deliberate tactic, shifting the reader's attention onto men as 'victims' of pornography, and though Wallace's approach is somewhat suspect, it certainly aligns both with Faludi's treatment of the pornography industry, and with Faludi's argument about shifts in the power structure of gender relations in *Stiffed*. Alongside this there is the knowledge that the article was initially written under pseudonyms (Willem R. deGroot and Matt Rundlet). Arguably, the anonymity that this affords Wallace at the time of writing could well affect

the writing of the piece (the article is published two years after the success of *Infinite Jest*). Then there is the issue of Wallace's moralizing—AVN members accuse him of this, along with shoddy journalism and an overuse of innuendo. Not only is there a sanctimonious lecture on capitalism in the article's opening, but also a fairly biased opinion that pornography is heading 'in an extremely dangerous direction' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 28). This particular aspect of Wallace's essay, all of which is contained within a footnote (fn. 23 extends longer than a full page in length), is vociferously feminist only if approached from an anti-pornography-feminist viewpoint—and is largely influenced by stereotypes. It accounts for only a fraction of the entire article, and because it is contained within a footnote it can be viewed as an aside—not worthy of being in the main body of the article, nor in harmony with the thematic priorities of Wallace's essay.

In a further footnote (fn. 21), Wallace correctly identifies that whereas 'dramatic pornography videos *simulate* the [...] sexualization of real life', the Gonzo pornography of Max Hardcore *et al* 'push[es] the envelope by offering the apparent sexualization of *actual* real life (by [...] combining real footage of babes on the Cannes beach with scripted footage of seduction and explicit sex). Gonzo thus obviously seems like the pornography equivalent of the mainstream trend in Docudrama [...], etc.' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 26). Wallace draws attention to the artificiality of pornography and its scripted nature, while demonstrating the implicit pretense that exists in its presentation to the viewer: that it is *not* constructed drama. Just as docudramas blend footage of actors with non-actors, staged shots with non-staged shots, so does gonzo pornography. What is witnessed, then, is still a fiction, but it is a fiction that aims at blurring the boundaries between everyday life and fiction. In doing so, Wallace questions the notion of women as victims of pornography, an approach that Holland fails to mention in her essay. As the voice Wallace adopts shifts to a somewhat pious assessment of contemporary pornography (fn. 23), it is worth remembering that the elements he describes, and that he objects to strongly are, by his own admission, fictional, staged, and simulated.

Furthermore, in the footnote prior to this (fn. 22) Wallace qualifies 'as fact' that there are occasions where 'real civilian 'little girls' [are talked into]



having anal sex on camera' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 26). Such 'little girls' are not kidnapped, trafficked, or threatened, according to Wallace—they simply volunteer: 'This is not a rumor. It is documented as fact. No theories on this phenomenon or on the civilian females' possible motives/susceptibilities will even be attempted here—the relevant questions are just too huge and stupefying' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 26). Wallace once more demonstrates the piousness that exists on this subject when failing to engage with the reasons why women enter into the pornography industry. His view of them as susceptible belittles their involvement, as does his assessment of the whole affair as inconceivable. Arguably, this also assumes that the women in the industry are always potential victims. Throughout the footnote in question (fn. 23) Wallace moves from a position of social commentator, reporting on the events of the *AVN Awards*, to one that moralizes over the present (1998) state of the pornography industry:

Your correspondents elect here to submit an opinion. [Gregory] Dark's and [Rob] Black's movies are not for men who want to be aroused and maybe masturbate. They are for men who have problems with women and want to see them humiliated. [...] In nearly all hetero pornography now there is a new emphasis on anal sex, painful penetrations, degrading tableaux, and the (at least) psychological abuse of women (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 27, fn. 23).

The opinion is far from objective and assumes a certain authority on the subject, and is heavily influenced by stereotypes. Although, this does point to the notion of power fantasies in pornography, which may suggest a reaction to the shifting power dynamics Faludi discusses in her article. Furthermore, the self-righteousness of the voice Wallace uses escalates to levels close to hysteria, as it contemplates the likely trajectory for the pornography industry:

As should be evident, the [pornography] industry's already gone pretty far; and with reenacted child abuse and barely disguised gang rapes now selling briskly, it is not hard to see where pornography is eventually going to have to go in order to retain its edge of disrepute. [...] it's clear that the real horizon late- '90s pornography is heading towards is the Snuff Film (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 28, fn. 23).

The voice that Wallace adopts is a moralising one, guided by stereotypes and the 'urban myth' of the snuff film. Further research into the pornography

industry, as Faludi appears to conduct for her essay, may provide much needed balance to this argument. Therefore, if this aspect of the essay is to be considered as vociferously feminist, then it is misguided and misinformed feminism at best. There is also the issue that Wallace is using footnotes to bring some major, and controversial points into the essay, which is odd in itself because footnotes are usually used as moments of digression or to elucidate minor aspects of an argument.

In a feminist move similar to that of Faludi's essay, 'Big Red Son' identifies the power held by the top female performers in the industry, yet the descriptive elements that appear around this discussion hint at feelings of derision, which serves to dispel the notion that the essay is in anyway to be considered as vociferously feminist. Much disdain is seen in the descriptions of the 'contract players' who, according to Wallace, 'treat the fans with the same absent, rigid-faced courtesy that flight attendants and restaurant hostesses tend to use', which presents a picture of everyday, 'normalized' roles—a strategy that once more avoids the sexuality aspect of the industry (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 15). Wallace chooses two stereotypically low skilled, low paid jobs that tend to be filled by women with which to contrast pornography's highest earners. The descriptions that Wallace offers of the various pornography 'starlets' at the expo appear as caricatures, and are oddly dehumanizing for an essay considered by Holland to be vociferously feminist:

Some of the starlets are so heavily made up they look embalmed. They tend to have complexly coiffed hair that [...] on closer inspection is dry and dead (pp. 12-13); Taylor [Hayes] is major-league pretty—she looks like a slightly debauched Cindy Crawford (p. 13); seeing performers now 'in the flesh', complete with chewing gum and chin-pimples and all the human stuff you never see—never want to see—in films (p. 19); [...] Jasmin St. Claire isn't even all that pretty [...] [h]er hair is dyed black in that cheap unreal Goth way, and she is so incredibly heavily made up that she looks like a crow. (She is also somewhat knock-kneed, plus of course has the requisite Howitzer-grade bust) (p. 20); The female performers seem, in truth, not just uncommunicative but downright surly (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 24).

These descriptions undercut the power of the female performers, belittling their non-perfection in the flesh, as opposed to the on-screen illusion of perfection. The caricature of the focus on cosmetics and on image is predictable,

while the dehumanizing of the women is as strange as it is offensive. However, there is no suggestion anywhere that the performers are coerced or are victims of the industry.<sup>41</sup>

The tone of the essay can be described as misogynistic and anti-feminist in its focus on outward appearances, and its negative approach. Yet, we may also consider that such a stance complements the essay's original intent—to show just how unerotic pornography is, according to Wallace and his fellow correspondent. Faludi's approach differs in that it offers no judgment. Instead, it presents a picture of the empowerment of women that stands in stark contrast to almost all other places of work, currently, where women in the pornography industry dictate the direction in which the industry goes, not only by acting but by 'moving behind the camera' (Faludi, 'Money', p. 81). Faludi's assessment of the pornography industry is that of a progressive one of women's empowerment. With respect to footnote twenty-three of 'Big Red Son', the viewpoint is clouded by outdated notions of morality and stereotypes, and cannot be considered an objective piece of reporting.

The text that most influences the section of 'Big Red Son' that deals with morality also stems from a conservative viewpoint: David Mura's *A Male Grief: Notes on Pornography and Addiction* (1987).<sup>42</sup> Unlike the brief allusion to Faludi's extensive, seemingly well-researched article on the pornography industry, Mura and his book are given centre stage. In a much-reduced format, here, the Mura quote that Wallace uses begins and ends: '[a]t the essence of pornography is the image of flesh used as a drug, a way of numbing psychic pain. [...] In engaging in such elimination the viewer reduces himself. He becomes stupid' (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 19). Wallace acknowledges that Mura's 'kind of stuff might sound a little out there' before introducing the simile that he feels exists 'between the eyes of males in strip clubs or stroke parlors and the eyes of people in their fifth hour of pumping silver dollars into the slot machines of the Sands' casino', which again tends to 'normalize' the behaviour of pornography

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<sup>41</sup> James D. Griffith *et al*, 'Why Become A Pornography Actress?', *International Journal Of Sexual Health*, 24.3 (2012), pp. 165-180, (p. 91) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2012.666514>>. This article stands in opposition to many of the claims Wallace's article makes about the industry. Its authors state that 'coercion' accounts for less than one percent of the reasons why women enter the industry, and that '[m]any of the negative characteristics identified are common in other occupations' (p. 176).

<sup>42</sup> David Mura, *A Male Grief: Notes on Pornography and Addiction: An Essay* (Milkweed Editions, 1987) Kindle Edition.

'addicts' by equating it with gambling (Wallace, 'BRS', p. 19). Wallace is willing to accept Mura's claims about pornography and addiction, even though Mura appears neither qualified to speak on pornography nor addiction from a professional standpoint. To give an indication of just how 'out there' Mura's thoughts are, here is the conclusion to *A Male Grief*:

What is the soul? The soul is what recognizes that we are being degraded in an act of abuse. [...] It remembers the past, it admits the future. It keeps the pain we try to repress. It is the goodness inside us that resists evil (Mura, loc. 464).

Mura's aims in the book are extremely ambitious given that the format runs to a mere twenty-four pages, and considering that the topics he covers begin with pornography and addiction before moving onto incest and paedophilia, with a brief consideration of the concept of freedom and also the consumption of images. Reading this conclusion gives no actual insight into pornography or addiction, or indeed any of the other topics mentioned. Instead it offers a cloying, hopelessly romantic summary of what the human 'soul' is, as if it is possible to make such a pronouncement. The conclusion gives the reader a good indication as to the content of the rest of the book, and of how Mura's thoughts flit from one topic to another with no meaningful links or evidence to corroborate his claims. It is not clear why Wallace cites this particular, poorly researched piece, other than the fact that it also relocates men as the victims of pornography, which follows on from Wallace's earlier mention of the men who are victims of auto-castration.<sup>43</sup>

Mura's work offers only one very limited view of the world of pornography, largely based upon stereotypes, and he chooses to focus on solely negative aspects of the pornography industry. For instance, the reader is told that 'addiction to pornography is not fun', and that the underlying symptoms causing the addiction, which include things such as 'shame and fear', lead to the endless consumption of 'magazines and strip shows, x-rated films, visits to prostitutes' (Mura, loc. 66). Again, one would expect evidence of research undertaken to corroborate such claims, but none is apparent. Pornography, according to Mura, is 'evil', and it operates the way in which it does because it

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<sup>43</sup> And if men are the victims does that place women in the role of perpetrators? Such a suggestion is extremely provocative, if that is what Wallace's use of Mura's book is meant to imply.

relies on the hierarchy of power that sees ‘abuser and victim’ as a necessary binary function (Mura, loc. 84). Mura seems fairly confident in his assertion because ‘feminist writers have, I think, convincingly argued that women are abused in pornography and are coerced into the victim role’ (Mura, loc. 93). Yet this kind of approach stands contrary to what Wallace focuses on in much of the essay (with the exception of fn. 23): that the women, apart from the B-girls, have autonomy, power, and control. Wallace’s article appears to question stereotypes and at times offers different perspectives from which to view the pornography industry—and this is an approach that is evident throughout his fiction, which will be discussed in later chapters.

### 3.4 Conclusion

Mura’s comments on feminist writers are concordant with Wallace’s view of ‘[f]eminists of all different stripe’ (Wallace, ‘BRS’, p. 18). Both Mura and Wallace seem ignorant of pro-pornography feminists, and Rebecca Gray points this out in AVN’s response to *Premiere* magazine with respect to its use of Wallace’s essay. Gray names the following, not exhaustive, list of pro-pornography feminists, ‘Annie Sprinkle, Susannah Breslin, Susie Bright, Tristan Taormino, Carol Queen, Betty Dodson, Candida Royalle, Gloria Leonard, Kathy Acker,<sup>44</sup> Jane Hamilton, Pat Califia’, and goes on to say that Wallace’s ‘ignorance (or was it flat out ignoring to gird your point?) of this wave of pro-pornography - and if I may, much more rational and humanist - feminism is unforgivable’ (‘AVN Responds’). Arguably, this seemingly sanctimonious element of Wallace’s essay is informed by Mura’s brand of ‘pornography is evil’ rhetoric, which is subjective, based upon stereotypes of the pornography industry, lacks credible evidence, and may be the reason this element appears in a footnote and not the main body of the text.

Wallace’s inclusion of anti-pornography sentiment is also evident in the ‘Adult World’ short stories of *Brief Interviews*, where the use of pornography seems only to have a damaging effect on relations between ‘the man’ and ‘his

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<sup>44</sup> Wallace’s review of Kathy Acker’s writing will be considered in the following chapter.

wife' (generic terms used by Wallace).<sup>45</sup> This is one area where it is possible to see the effects of a rigid set of gender 'attributes'—the man is addicted to pornography, and his wife feels inadequate as a result of this, which causes the relationship to spiral into decline. A simple conclusion can be drawn from this—that the man is the abuser (of both himself and of the women in pornography, as Mura suggests) while the woman is the victim of pornography, in that her relationship falls apart in spite of her best efforts to save the marriage (which fits with Holland's appraisal of Wallace's 'bestial' male). However, the gendered binary of abuser and victim is a trope that Wallace subverts throughout his fiction, and this is an aspect of his writing that will be scrutinized in more detail later on—it is an aspect that does much to problematize gender fixity, and very much speaks to the notion of gender hybridity, which seems far more progressive than the Wallace that writes under a pseudonym about the pornography industry. Also, Wallace's tendency to offer multiple perspectives, or to complicate notions of narrator and/or point-of-view in his fiction is something that speaks of possibility, rather than the foreclosing that accompanies Updike's voices, for example.

Though this chapter problematizes Holland's assessment of two of Wallace's essays as being vociferously feminist, her call for scholars to consider the impact of issues of gender in Wallace's works has been shown to be another vital avenue of inquiry. This, coupled with an understanding of Wallace's commitment to understanding issues connected with gender relations, as demonstrated in the consideration of the copy of Biskind's book from Wallace's personal library, offers the potential for more diverse discourse to enter Wallace studies. Both Roache's and Bustillos' respective arguments are rejected, here, due to the fact that they only maintain focus on the self-help books found within Wallace's personal library, and so neither Bustillos' moves to pathologize Wallace via his marginalia and notes, nor Roache's rejection of the same applies to this thesis. My claims centre around Wallace's awareness of and engagement with issues of gender, which, I assert, have their roots in his experiences of

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<sup>45</sup> The chapter on *Brief Interviews* will look at the point-of-view and narrative voice of this story. David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) (London: Abacus, 2001).

Sedgwick's arrival on campus at Amherst with her 'Sabrina' talk, which then manifests itself in the opening chapter of his debut novel, *Broom*.

And finally, Wallace's efforts at communicating the complexity of the pornography industry to a more mainstream audience highlights the care a reader must take when attempting to analyse his works. Through his use of comedic effect, of voice that shifts in its perspective (thereby allowing for multiple perspectives), and via a stance that sees Wallace's speaker(s) avoid, mostly, the more emotive elements of the topic, Wallace lingers over nuanced areas of discussion. Though it is apparent in this reading that some of the voices that Wallace adopts suffer from moments of critical blindness (much of this occurring around notions of feminism as always anti-pornography), the fact that the complexities and contradictions inherent within gender discourse are explicitly on display in his works makes it all the more urgent for critics to examine the works in a new light. In effect, Wallace's tactic of using multiple perspectives serves to complicate and disrupt representations of gender. It is precisely this that is considered in the next chapter of this thesis, as the discussion turns to a selection of Wallace's essays and book reviews.

## 4. WALLACE'S BOOK/FILM REVIEWS and GENDER DISCOURSE

This chapter focuses on those occasions in David Foster Wallace's book reviews and essays where Wallace appears to critique culturally accepted notions of gender that serve to maintain the hierarchy of gender. Wallace focuses on the ways in which the enactment of gender always stems from culturally prescribed and acceptable versions of gender performativity (acceptable to the very culture that prescribes them in the first instance), whether it is performativity that subverts or conforms to such versions. Judith Butler notes the way in which gender 'is itself (re)produced through its embodiment, through the acts that strive to approximate it, through the idealizations reproduced in and by those acts'.<sup>1</sup> According to Butler, it is the performativity of gender that maintains gender's so-called intelligibility, and thus the foundations upon which gender stands are open to question. In this respect, then, Wallace grapples with and considers at length issues of gender that are usually the focus of those writing from within the feminist tradition. Mary K. Holland views this as a central concern of Wallace's, where his 'feminist interests appear early in his writing'.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts see in Wallace's fiction, in particular, a move to 'denigrate the experiences' of the 'female characters' he

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, 'Gender Regulations', in *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Mary K. Holland, "'By Hirsute Author': Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58 (2017), 64-77, (p. 65).



writes.<sup>3</sup> As this chapter progresses these conflicting views will be useful to the position set out in this thesis. It is certainly the case that Wallace wrote many non-fiction works, on a vast array of topics and in a number of styles (essay, book review, film review, journalistic pieces, etc.), and this affords the opportunity to link some of the preoccupations that resurface consistently in his non-fiction texts with those of his fictional works.

Presently, there remains the tendency in Wallace studies to consider the non-fiction texts as merely an ancillary of his fictional works—that they are used in order to compliment, and not to inform such works directly.<sup>4</sup> This thesis challenges that notion in considering the diversity of topics found throughout Wallace's non-fiction. Wallace wrote on a great many subjects, informed in part by his training in maths and philosophy, on the one hand, and by his fascination with language, literature, and popular culture, on the other. Wallace wrote journalistic pieces that lack the rigour of conventional journalism, where he elaborates on certain issues and even bends the truth at times, producing something akin to a kind of fictional reportage.<sup>5</sup> Many of Wallace's non-fiction works are written in a mixture of formal and informal registers, deliberately complicating the subjects he considers as the voice he adopts appears at once scholarly, while also exhibiting the casualness of the 'slacker' or 'stoner' generation that plays down the appearance of intellect. However, across the broad range of subjects that Wallace engages with certain themes emerge from his non-fiction, serving to corroborate the claims made of his fictional works. Several such themes are mined thoroughly by critics attending to Wallace's apparent interest in areas such as the use of irony in postmodern society

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts, 'White Guys: Questioning Infinite Jest's New Sincerity', *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5 (2017), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Adam Kelly's thoughts on this matter recognize the current need for a 'growing awareness that Wallace's non-fiction need not simply be read in the shadow of his fiction' (p. 55). Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline', *IJAS Online* (2010), 47-59.

<sup>5</sup> Particular, yet by no means exhaustive examples of this are: Wallace's reporting of the aftermath of 9/11 in which he claims to spend a certain amount of time at his neighbour's house, whom he refers to as being a member of his church group – when in fact the people concerned are members of his recovery group (p. 263); and his account of attending a mid-western county fair with a 'native companion', whom Wallace refers to as an old friend, when in fact the person in question is the daughter of a colleague, and whom he barely knew before the event (p. 184). D. T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*. New York: Penguin Books, 2013 [2012]. Jonathan Franzen also hints at Wallace's looseness with facts in an interview documented by Michelle Dean, 'A Supposedly True Thing Jonathan Franzen said about David Foster Wallace', *The Awl* <https://theawl.com/a-supposedly-true-thing-jonathan-franzen-said-about-david-foster-wallace-8f37fd7c0bfd#.myved9firm> (2011) [2 Dec 2019].

(Goerlandt; Dulk), issues of addiction (Freudenthal), and of arguments of a philosophical nature (Van Ewijk; Olsen).<sup>6</sup>

As a precursor to what follows it must be noted that Wallace often spoke in terms of 'she' and 'her', both in interviews and in his own essays, when discussing readers and authors. An example of this is seen in the much cited interview with Larry McCaffery.<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of the interview Wallace offers the view that 'serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves' (McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 127). There exist many more examples both here and elsewhere in Wallace's essays, where the subject is explicitly gendered in this manner. When discussing authorial skill, Wallace talks of the author needing to apply such talent so that the 'reader will trust her', and further on that the author need not write simply to 'be liked, so that her true end isn't in the work but in a certain audiences good opinion', with the danger being that in seeking out such favour 'she is going to develop a terrific hostility to that audience, simply because she has given all her power away to them' (McCaffery, 'Interview', p. 130). This trait of Wallace's is referred to by Clare Hayes-Brady as part of 'Wallace's appropriation of the female', which in this instance relates to what she views in his works as the 'recurrent reference to the she-reader'.<sup>8</sup> This habit of Wallace's continues throughout his lifetime, and nods to a preoccupation with issues of gender because it must be assumed that it takes some effort to consciously refer to the subject in this way.

As the chapter progresses, a selection of book reviews written by Wallace gives further insight into Wallace's critique of gender relations, which ultimately leads to an understanding of the influence that gender discourse has upon his wider *corpus*. The first of these is an extended, essay length review of

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<sup>6</sup> I. Goerlandt, 'Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away: Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Critique - Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47 (2006), 309-328, in *SCOPUS* [accessed 24 March 2014]. A. D. Dulk, 'Beyond Endless "Aesthetic" Irony: A Comparison of the Irony Critique of Søren Kierkegaard and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Studies in the Novel*, 44 (2012), 325-345, in *SCOPUS* [accessed 24 March 2014]; Elizabeth Freudenthal, 'Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*', *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), 191. Petrus Van Ewijk, "'I' and the 'Other': The Relevance of Wittgenstein, Buber and Levinas for an Understanding of AA's Recovery Program in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", *English Text Construction*, 2 (2009), 132-145. Lance Olsen, 'Termite Art, Or Wallace's Wittgenstein', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13 (1993), 199-199.

<sup>7</sup> Larry McCaffery, 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13 (1993), 127-150.

<sup>8</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, 'Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point': David Foster Wallace and Gender', *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, (2015), 64-78, (p. 66).

David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.<sup>9</sup> Following this, more conventional-length book reviews of Kathy Acker's *Portrait of an Eye*, and Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold*, respectively, and a film review of *Terminator 2*.<sup>10</sup> The reviews span the early years of the 1990s (1990-92), a period of great importance with respect to the development of gender discourse and the questioning of gender constructs. During the course of the reviews, Wallace pauses to problematize cultural notions of gender that are often read as axiomatic. However, rather than offering a kind of academic feminist discourse, as Sedgwick does upon her arrival at Amherst, Wallace adopts the role of *provocateur*. Where his texts offer the opportunity for us to consider the wider implications of social constructs, with respect to the enactment of gender, it is left to the reader to decide how this impacts upon contemporary, post-industrial society.

#### 4.1 *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, and the Turn to Gender

David Markson's 1988 novel, *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, is a complex work of fiction written at the height of postmodernism. Its structure is fragmented, where frequently a single sentence acts as a paragraph and where it is rare to find more than three sentences linked together to form a paragraph. The act of remembering associated with Markson's protagonist appears as more than mere coincidence given that Kate is known to have had a husband named Adam, thereby alluding to Kate's 'Evian' position as Earth's sole survivor; and, in fact, she even misremembers her son's name as Adam, though he is later confirmed as Simon, before this is thrown into confusion when she later refers to him as Lucien (Markson, pp. 9, 222).<sup>11</sup> Even Kate's identity is called into question when she remembers an incident in her mother's bedroom where her mother refers

<sup>9</sup> David Markson, *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Kathy Acker, *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1992). Siri Hustvedt, *The Blindfold: A Novel* (London: Macmillan, 2003). David Foster Wallace, 'F/X Porn', *Waterstone's Magazine*, 12, Winter/Spring (1998).

<sup>11</sup> There are a couple of paradoxes to consider here. The first stems from Wallace's insistence on describing Kate in one of two ways: as being of Evian, or of Hellenic position. The most obvious problem with likening Kate's character to that of Eve is that Eve was the prototype for all women who followed, and thus the Earth's sole survivor could not possibly assume such a mantle as others have gone before her. The second complication to arise here is that the existence of a text (what eventually becomes the novel) counteracts any notion of Kate being the only remaining person on the planet, for a text is there to be read by others.

to her as Kate, and later refers to her as Helen (Markson, pp. 33, 228). This incongruity proves most helpful when considering Wallace's review of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.<sup>12</sup> A search of the Internet shows that there are only two professional reviews of *WM*. The first appears on the Books section of *The New York Times* website, and is written by Amy Hempel. Hempel's review, titled 'Home is Where the Art is', was published on 22nd May 1988.<sup>13</sup> Hempel's reading of Markson's novel appears to be positive, largely. Hempel writes, 'Mr. Markson has matched the haunting premise of his novel with writing that is in direct alignment with it. For *Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a remarkable technical feat. It is a novel that can be parsed like a sentence; it is that well made' (Hempel). In the other professional review of Markson's novel, Wallace derides Hempel for giving a 'smarmy review' of Markson's text.<sup>14</sup>

At around the halfway point of the essay Wallace 'launches a feminist critique of the male author's treatment of femininity in [a] philosophical and linguistic context', turning from a rather broad discussion of Wittgensteinian philosophical influences to a more nuanced, at times peculiar discussion of the text, where Wallace merges his own reading of Kate with links to 'ideals' of women based in antiquity.<sup>15</sup> Lance Olsen sees a commonality in Ludwig Wittgenstein and Wallace's aims in that 'they share a certain quality of mind that may helpfully be thought of as termite consciousness', and that though the two differ fairly substantially Olsen finds their tendency to 'play games in order to wrestle with very real problems, in order to attempt to work through the world'.<sup>16</sup> Olsen takes Wallace's life-experiences as effectively wedding him to Wittgenstein's theories, and in this respect opens up many possibilities for reading Wallace's works, as a writer ever questioning that which is 'known'. Holland notes the way in which Wallace 'establishe[s] Wittgenstein's theory of meaning as "family resemblances"' and that by 'opposing here the wholly

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<sup>12</sup> Referred to hereon in as *WM*.

<sup>13</sup> Amy Hempel, 'Home is Where the Art is', *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/05/22/books/home-is-where-the-art-is.html> (1988) [Accessed 2 December 2019]

<sup>14</sup> David Foster Wallace. 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's Wittgenstein's Mistress', in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 10.2 (1990) pp. 217-239, (p. 247).

<sup>15</sup> Examples mentioned by Wallace are: Penelope of the Attic; Clytemnestra; Eve; Helen of Troy; and Cassandra. Mary K. Holland, "'By Hirsute Author": Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 58 (2017), 64-77, (p. 65).

<sup>16</sup> Lance Olsen, 'Termite Art, Or Wallace's Wittgenstein', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13 (1993), 199-215, pp.201-2.

isolated subject constituted by lack and desire with the “fluid web of ‘family resemblances’” that distinguishes the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wallace thus suggests that a more useful, connecting method of constituting self might be available within a different frame of representation, one in which use and relationship are required to produce meaning: subjecthood as a matter of discourse’ (Holland, ‘Hirsute’, p. 69). In this respect, Wallace’s reading of Kate draws attention to culturally accepted notions of gender, committing a kind of historically informed critique of the hierarchical structure of the gender binary. Wallace’s move acts as a method of using a fictional text (Markson’s) to further philosophical speculation on the influence of gender in relation to the objectification of women throughout history, once more linking with Butler’s thoughts noted earlier, while also confirming Olsen’s view on Wallace’s writing project. This is just one of the ways in which Wallace critiques the enactment of the hierarchical structure of gender that is prevalent in Western society. An example of this is seen as Wallace considers the ways in which ‘via her memorial project, Kate makes ‘external’ history *her own*’ (Wallace, ‘Plenum’, p. 226). Kate’s role as the ultimate solipsist,<sup>17</sup> as the book’s title suggests, sees her perform the role of grand curator in a kind of ‘museum’ world devoid of people.<sup>18</sup> It is a world still full of the artifacts of cultural history—the kind that tends to be exclusionary in its gender bias, where woman is concerned.

This reading furthers both the claims of Olsen and Holland, in that this chapter sets up Wallace’s feminist project as one that has its roots both in his non-fiction and fiction. Though imperfect, Wallace’s writing does exhibit a feminist sensibility and this is on display most clearly in ‘Plenum’. Firstly, Wallace places particular emphasis on Kate, where some critics do not.<sup>19</sup> For example, Wallace hones in on the fact that ‘it is not an accident (though it is an allusion) that Kate has a fetish for feeding the warp & woof of tragic history into fires—she is the final historian, its tragedian and destructor, cremating each

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<sup>17</sup> Note the link with solipsism that is presented in Wallace’s review and subsequent parody of Updike (see previous chapter).

<sup>18</sup> Which brings about a curious paradox to consider: can a world devoid of society provide a platform from which to offer social commentary?

<sup>19</sup> Marija Cetinic, ‘Fragile Pages of Grey Ashes: Inoperative Archives in Dubravka Ugrešić’s *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*’, in *European Journal of English Studies*, 14 (2010), pp. 75-87. Here, an ‘unnamed someone’, also later referred to as ‘Markson’s narrator’, is nowhere in the essay referred to by her actual name (p. 82).

page of Herodotus (the 1st historian!) as she reads it' (Wallace, 'Plenum', p. 226). Kate displays a form of skepticism towards cultural history in general, and towards the men overseeing its formation. Certainly, viewing Kate as the final historian is remarkable in that it places her in a position long reserved for men, as she is both judge and jury, and her decision is final—although we must be mindful that Kate is more of a cultural historian (and a fictional one at that). Secondly, an engagement with the question of 'woman' starts to dominate the latter half of the essay, which has its roots in feminist critical thinking and the turn towards gender discourse.<sup>20</sup>

Just what is the significance of Kate's role in the text, according to Wallace's review? Wallace's asserts that 'Kate's central identification with the 'fact' of historical personage [lies most closely] with Helen of Troy/Hisarlik' (Wallace, 'Plenum', p. 229), and that it is through the figure of Helen that:

Issues orbiting Helen & femininity & guilt mark a sort of transition in this novel & its reading. Have I yet mentioned that a notable feature of *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, male-written, is that the novel's composed entirely of the words of a female character? And it is in terms of gender & authenticity, I think, that Markson's book becomes at once least perfect & most interesting. Most 1988ish. Most important as not just a literary transposition of a philosophic position but also a transcendence of received doctrine. Here Descartes & Kant & Wittgenstein cease being overt critical touchstones and become springboards for a flawed, moving meditation on loneliness, language & gender (Wallace, 'Plenum', p. 230).

When Kate is referred to by her mother as Helen (towards the end of the novel), along with the many 'Helen' references that Kate makes throughout the text, Wallace seems to be correct in his assertion that Helen is where Kate's central identification lies. According to Wallace's reading, Helen, femininity (a so-called trait of gender), and guilt, are bound together. By making explicit the link between Kate and Helen of Troy, Wallace places the focus on gender, and in particular on the construction of the notion of femininity and the subsequent guilt often associated with it, which once more speaks of a concern with gender

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<sup>20</sup> During an interview Wallace criticizes feminists for their views of, *I*: 'Feminists are always saying this, so feminists are saying white males [inaudible] OK, I'm going to sit down and write this enormous book and impose my phallus upon the consciousness of the world' (00:24:20). Wallace uses the term feminist seemingly unproblematically, as if 'feminists' is an umbrella term for all people who share such views. Anon, 'DFW', *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hm94gUBCih8> (2012) [Accessed 2 Dec 2019]

discourse. Holland suggests that 'Wallace argues that by placing her passive guilt in the context of Wittgenstein's picture-theory representational system in which the novel confines her, the novel produces a compelling reading of the particular ways women suffer in any setting informed by such an understanding of representation and reality' (Holland, p. 65).<sup>21</sup> Holland views Wallace's attempt at a feminist reading of Markson's text as the element that leads to a 'meditation on male culpability in objectifying women in the process of constructing such a meditation' (Holland, p. 66). According to Holland, then, Kate is just another example of 'a woman's inability to escape the definitions of men', which sounds like a familiar complaint made of male authors (Holland, p. 66). A similar objection is put forth by Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts, where they claim that 'Wallace's problem is less that Markson resorts to misogynist ideas of women, but that by giving Kate a 'feminine' back story, he undercuts her pan-human appeal', which suggests that Wallace really is using Kate for his own purposes, and not to further a feminist critique of the novel (Jackson, 'White Guys', p. 18). My reading differs from the assessments of Holland, and Jackson *et al*, due to the following.

Firstly, Wallace is open and honest about his interest in Markson's text—precisely because Kate is a woman written by a man—and this should not necessarily lead to charges of misappropriation (Wallace appropriating feminism to further a masculinist enquiry, for example). Holland's claim, here, is that Wallace's 'essay reveals itself as more than a feminist critique' of Markson's novel, and that 'it haltingly introduces a meditation that will occupy Wallace throughout his career, on the (heterosexual) male author's appropriation of women, fictional and not, when in confrontation with loneliness, language, and the opposite gender' (Holland, 'Hirsute', p. 67). Instead, for Wallace it is the notion of gender and authenticity where Markson's novel becomes at once least perfect and most interesting. Wallace views the text as a transcendence of received doctrine and it becomes apparent that gender *is* the received doctrine that he speaks of—and this thesis does not operate in the realm of 'opposite' genders, which simply confirms binary thinking. Butler notes that '[o]ne

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<sup>21</sup> Holland suggests that Wallace views the system in the manner of a female character 'imprisoned' by a male author.

important sense of regulation, then, is that persons are regulated by gender, and that this sort of regulation operates as a condition of cultural intelligibility for any person' (Butler, 'Regulations', p. 52). Effectively, we see this in Holland's claims, but also Jackson's and Hayes-Brady's, respectively, where gender is only ever commented upon in terms of an oppositional, binary stance, as if masculinity and femininity are always two distinct modes of being that can never combine to become more, which is a way of thinking that feeds the cultural intelligibility that Butler suggests regulates people. Once more, the repetitive nature of gender 'codes' is this received doctrine that people follow. Although not entirely clear at this stage where Wallace is heading with the review, there is evidence of an engagement with feminist ideas, and that his interest concerns the enactment of gender. Wallace continues to explain his interest in Kate and his particular reading of her narrative:

See, Homer's Helen is 'guilty' finally not because of anything she's done but because of who she is, how she appears, what she looks like; because of the effect she has, hormonally/emotionally, on men who're ready to kill & die over what they're made to feel. Kate, like Helen, is haunted by an unspoken but oppressive sense that ' . . . everything is her [own] fault'. What everything? How close is she to the Helen she invokes? Well, first off, it's easy to see how radical skepticism—Descartes's hell & Kate's vestibule—yields at once omnipotence & moral oppression. If The World is entirely a function of Facts that not only reside in but *hail from* one's own head, one is just as Responsible for that world as is a mother for her child, or herself (Wallace, 'Plenum', pp. 230-1).

Wallace posits the notion that radical skepticism sees us all equally responsible for the world around us, as it is the world that hails from the facts in one's own head.<sup>22</sup> Wallace then goes on to question the validity of such thinking by taking his view of Kate into account, where she is the responsible monad in question:

This seems straightforward. But what's less clear & way richer is the peculiar slant this omniresponsibility takes when the responsible monad in question is historically *passive*, per- & conceived as an object and not a subject—ie when one is a

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<sup>22</sup> Hail, used here and also in Wallace's HIV/AIDS essay, seems a peculiar, somewhat archaic word to use. It has connotations of thoughts being summoned by the mind to influence the shaping of the world around us. Its Germanic origins can also be brought into question, with its use as a greeting, most notably around its use connected with world leaders: Hail to the Chief; and, *Heil* Hitler. 'Hail' also links with Althusser's concept of interpellation and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)—Althusser's view that ideology summons a subject into a position (Leitch, p. 1504). Vincent B. Leitch and William E. Cain, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).



woman, one who can effect change & cataclysm not as an agent but merely as a perceived entity . . . perceived by historically active testosterone glands whose glands positively *gush* with agency. To be an object of desire (by hirsute characters), speculation (by hirsute author), oneself the 'product' of male heads & shafts is to be almost *Classically* feminized, less Eve than Helen, 'responsible' without freedom to choose, act, or forebear (Wallace, 'Plenum', pp. 230-1).

Kate's voice can be seen as passive when considering that a male author gifts it. Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts, in a discussion of *Infinite Jest* that links Wallace's treatment of women to his thoughts on Kate in 'Plenum', note that '[i]n the context of *Infinite Jest*'s depiction of AA, these female speakers' physical pain offers an abject counterpoint to the masculine lovelessness' that Wallace is said often to portray throughout his works of fiction (Jackson, 'White Guys', p. 20). Again, there exists confusion around sex and gender, which furthers the claim of Butler's that gender is now firmly positioned in terms of its cultural intelligibility-- Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts' use of female contrasting with masculine in the same sentence demonstrate this, as it suggests that to be female is to stand outside of masculinity, while masculine 'lovelessness' is out of bounds for the female. In another of Jackson's works he states taking an approach to 'Wallace's writing of the body as a performative process' but that he does not 'suggest that Wallace follows Butler's attempts to problematize sex and gender' (Jackson, *Toxic*, pp. 18-9). Instead, Jackson claims that the 'dynamics' he focuses on in Wallace's works 'support the idea that gender is the natural expression of an immutable sex', which once more maintains the binary position of gender (as opposites) while continuing to support the idea that sex *is* the site of gender. Specifically, in his focus on gender, Wallace views all women as historically *passive*—a classic point in feminist criticism, but at the time of writing seems a touch passé given the advent of works by Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, *et al.* And as Wallace's writing progresses, the boundaries of gender become less distinct, as will be shown in the coming chapters. But what of Wallace's choice of modifier: historically? Wallace uses the same word in his mention of active testosterone glands, and continues:

The [my] terribly blanket assumption is that received Western perceptions of women as moral agents divide into those of Hellenic & those of Evian (Eve-ish) responsibility; the claim I can

support is that Markson, despite his worst intentions, manages to triumph over 400 years of post-Miltonic tradition and to present the Hellenic as the more poignant—certainly more apposite—situation of women in any system where appearance remains a 'picture' or 'map' of *ontology*. This presentation seems neither pre- nor post-feminist: it's just darned imaginative, ingenious even; and as such—despite some failures of authorial vision & nerve—flies or falls on its own merits (Wallace, 'Plenum', pp. 230-1).

Wallace situates gender in a culturally historical context, making it explicit that figures such as Helen, Eve, Clytemnestra, Electra, and Cassandra have no agency with which to affect events, and that agency is the domain of testosterone producing men. While focusing primarily on his blanket assumption about received Western perceptions of women as moral agents divided along two lines (Evian or Hellenic), Wallace offers two models of femininity as hypotheses to back up this claim—Wallace's reading suggests the Hellenic model as the most poignant and indeed most apposite. Wallace even invokes Baudrillard's simulacra when discussing the situation of women as that of a picture or map of ontology (represented rather than representing).<sup>23</sup>

The notion of omniresponsibility that Wallace recognizes in Kate, as the sole survivor and keeper of the world's 'facts', allows this theoretical position. All of cultural history, at least in a Western sense, is structured to position women as objects who lack agency; or better still, considered to be structured in a way that classically feminizes women, as Wallace phrases it.<sup>24</sup> Once more, this positions Wallace as a writer capable of extending sensibilities that capture arenas of life that may not necessarily impact him directly—the straight, white man from a relatively privileged background.<sup>25</sup> Holland offers a criticism of Wallace without necessarily identifying the possibilities that may result, when stating that what is '[e]asily most surprising and interesting about Wallace's 'feminist' critique of Wittgenstein's *Mistress* are the ways in which he reads the novel as damning its narrator to suffer not just feminine guilt but also what he

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations (1981)', in *Crime and Media* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 69-85.

<sup>24</sup> By noting that woman is historically perceived and conceived of by man, Wallace draws attention to the fact that women are often erased from history, and that the history we 'know' is biased.

<sup>25</sup> Terms such as 'straight', 'white', 'male', and 'privileged', are problematic in that they are reductive, but they encapsulate for the reader a snapshot of Wallace's identity. And note Wallace's own use of 'white males' in the television interview with Charlie Rose.

sees as a particularly masculine absence of being' (Holland, p. 66). Though clearly not meant in any progressive sense, Holland's critique speaks of a kind of gender hybridity, whereby Kate bridges the gender divide across these traits. Jackson's assessment is less sympathetic in its talk of Wallace offering merely a 'model of misogyny based around guilt as subject' (Evian), along with a 'model of guilt as object' (Hellenic) (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 187). Once more, this differs from my reading of Wallace's essay, where a more nuanced approach builds upon previous work on Wallace and gender.

Wallace offers his thoughts on the successfulness, or not, of Markson's attempts to render the voice, psyche, and predicament of a woman, before mentioning his own attempts: '[s]ome of the fiction I try to write is in feminine voice, and I consider myself sensitive to the technical/political problems involved in 'cross- writing', and I found the female persona here compelling & real' (Wallace, 'Plenum', p. 231). Cross-writing has connotations of cross-dressing, where the style of an Other is adopted. Such labels can be viewed as merely two different notions of dramatic self-projection, in that they are neither unusual nor uncommon.<sup>26</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady asserts that this part of the essay is where 'Wallace obliquely invokes Lenore Beadsman, the protagonist of *The Broom of the System*, [...] as his first foray into 'cross-writing''.<sup>27</sup> Earlier in her analysis, Hayes-Brady talks about 'Wallace's [...] engagement with femininity and femaleness', and her use of the term 'feminine' differs from the approach in this thesis, where femininity does not solely apply to women (p. 133). Hayes-Brady tends to substitute femininity for 'female' on a number of occasions, using the two interchangeably (binding gender to sex). Hayes-Brady's use, here, appears not to account for attributes of gender (masculinity and femininity) that are more fluid and complex than cultural notions of gender would have us believe.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Two unconnected examples of such might be Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford: OUP, 2014); and Colm Toibin, *Brooklyn* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Curiously, Lenore 'ghosts' Wallace, here, in a similar manner to the way Kate is 'ghosted' by Wittgenstein. Clare Hayes-Brady, "'...': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace", in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 131-150, (p. 134).

<sup>28</sup> This is detailed in the earlier chapter on *The Broom of the System*. For a more in-depth discussion of this read J. Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); and Lisa Diamond and Molly Butterworth, 'Questioning Gender and Sexual Identity: Dynamic Links Over Time', in *Sex Roles*, 59 (2008), 365.

Does cross-writing differ from attempts at writing in a feminine voice? Writing in a feminine voice implies that there is a singular force at work—the feminine modifying the voice—whilst cross-writing, itself suggestive of masquerade or performativity, implies more a form of connection, perhaps making use of both the masculine and the feminine in ever more complex ways.<sup>29</sup> If Wallace's attempt at cross-writing is a way of writing through a woman's persona, but not limiting that persona to the feminine, we may view that persona as potentially accessing both the feminine *and* the masculine.<sup>30</sup> Once more, this is an aspect of Wallace's text that engages with gender discourse and the enactment of gender. Hayes-Brady suggests that the 'weakness of his female characters speaks strongly to the concerns he expressed about "access to other selves" and his own authorial inability to gain this kind of access' (Hayes-Brady, 'Neutral', p.64). Again, the coming chapters will see my work add to the existing body of criticism on Wallace and gender, where a more nuanced approach sees Wallace adept at handling both the male and female experience, while also exhibiting more of a sense of gender hybridity than the rigid patterns that Holland, Jackson, and Hayes-Brady recognize in his works. Indeed, this view is more in keeping with Joffe's assessment of Lenore in *Broom* as 'not merely a disguise for verisimilitude but also an opportunity for Wallace to privilege the female perspective early on in his novel', and that '[t]hrough Lenore, the author is able to issue both a critique and a rejection of the forms of masculinity being produced at his own university at the time' (Joffe, 'No Man's Land', p. 154). The view of cross-writing that Joffe puts forth is much more aligned to the aims of this thesis, where 'difference' around notions of gender becomes more complex as binary thinking is rejected in order to think through cross-writing as privileging other perspectives.

I propose that something else emanates from Wallace's engagement and that this merits further critical attention in order to explicate what effect this

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<sup>29</sup> Wallace's efforts at writing from a woman's point of view will be noted in the following chapters discussing his works of fiction.

<sup>30</sup> Despite Hayes-Brady's use of the terms feminine and female, she does suggest a similar way of thinking to the one proposed in this thesis. When discussing Julia Kristeva's 'idea of the negative function of women. [...] The concept of woman as attitude further complicates the self-confessedly autobiographical writing of Lenore Beardsman by suggesting that Wallace's literary sensibilities may be female and that Lenore's linguistic resonances are male', which suggests possibility around gender hybridity, rather than closure (Hayes-Brady, p. 149).

has on Western post-industrialized society, whether in a purely philosophical context or a more reified sense. The need for this is evident in the ways in which Wallace steps outside of the restrictions imposed upon him via contemporary notions of identity in order to both engage with issues of gender and also to provide a critique of feminism from the standpoint of a person who has seemingly little to gain from such a move. Here, it is apposite to note the way that Wallace criticizes Markson for needing to explain Kate's back-story to the reader:

What I'm negative on is the particular strategy Markson sometimes employs to try to explain Kate's 'female' feelings both of ultimate guilt & of ultimate loneliness. [...] The proffered explanation is rather that, back in the halcyon pre-Fall days when the world was humanly populated, Kate betrayed her husband with other men, & that subsequently her little boy (variously Simon or, gulp, again Adam) died, in Mexico, possibly of meningitis, & that then her husband left her, about ten years ago, 'time out of mind', at the same psychohistorical point at which Kate's world emptied and the diasporic quest for anyone else alive in the world at all commenced, a search that led Kate to the empty beach where she now resides & declaims to no one [*sic*] (Wallace, 'Plenum', pp. 231-2).

Markson's portrayal of Kate ultimately leads her to the position of the stereotypical 'fallen' woman. Indeed, the above passage not only highlights those concerns about Markson explaining Kate's back-story, but it also fits with the concerns that are evident in Wallace's reading of *WM* and that have to do with femininity and guilt, and with the enactment of gender. Wallace goes on:

Her betrayals & her son's death & husband's departure—alluded to over & over, albeit coyly—are the Evian diagnosis of her transgression & metaphysical damnation; they're presented, with an insistence impossible to ignore, as Kate's Fall across gender, a Fall from the graces of a community in which she is both agent & object into a post-Romantic, Wittgensteinian world of utter subjectivity & pathological responsibility, into the particular intellectual/ emotional/moral isolation a 1988 U.S. reader associates with *men*, males alienated via agency from an Exterior we have to objectify, use up, burn the pages of in order to remain subjects, ontologically secure in shield & shaft [*sic*] (Wallace, 'Plenum', pp. 231-2).

Here is an example of Wallace's fascination with markers of difference, gender in this instance, which he suggests impinge on relations between humans (and

which continue to promote the notion of 'opposite' genders despite much work to dismantle such views from within the academy).<sup>31</sup> Holland states that 'Wallace is reading [Kate's] 'Fall' from feminine guilt and particularity into masculine subjectivity as a passage into a subject position doubly troubled, impossibly troubled, by her inability to act simultaneously as the Exterior against which she must define herself—and which she must destroy in that defining—and as the subject she seeks to define' (Holland, p. 67). Again, though Holland does not seem to identify the possibilities, here, Wallace is willing to consider that Kate can occupy positions of both femininity *and* masculinity, however imperfect his attempt may be, which once more speaks of the possibility of gender hybridity. And on the topic of Wallace's repeated use of Wittgenstein throughout his works Olsen states that 'Wallace continually enacts Wittgenstein's interrogation of the efficacy of language in his texts. The mechanisms might be different; the motive is much the same' (Olsen, 'Termite', p. 208). Again, there may exist imperfection in Wallace's reading of Wittgenstein but Olsen identifies a key component of Wallace's writing, where constant questioning rather than ready acceptance is the aim. And in this respect, Wallace's questioning of the language used around gender highlights his fascination with issues of gender.

Undeniably, there is an engagement of sorts by Wallace with issues most closely associated with what we collectively term feminism. However, as already mentioned, Wallace's claims are not a form of revelation for feminism with respect to the historical subjugation of women. Yet it gives us an indication of the extent to which Wallace is prepared to engage with issues of gender discourse, and in particular the enactment of gender. Such a question within feminism is inextricably linked with identity politics.<sup>32</sup> The surprising thing about Wallace's engagement is that it does not appear to reflect a sense of his own identity politics (as one who regularly professes in interviews his status as a straight, white, male). In fact, it is this that makes it all the more apt to pursue such a line of thought because feminism has fragmented to such an extent that

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<sup>31</sup> And perhaps a problem that arises from *WM* is the fact that whatever human interaction is present is only ever that as told through Kate's back-story, and is thus implicitly subjective.

<sup>32</sup> See Judith Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism', in *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 21-39

the question of 'woman' seems to be ever irresolvable and problematic, as some feminists continue to struggle with, while others simply refuse to accommodate the multiplicity of voices that make up feminism across intersections of not only gender, but race, class, and sexuality, amongst other markers.<sup>33</sup>

It is both the physical and emotional locations of *WM* that allow such a move on Wallace's part. Kate exists in a state outside of society due to the fact that she is Earth's sole survivor—a society is never made up of a single entity. The beach location is particularly important in the way it evokes liminality, where land meets sea, and according to current theories of evolution, where humankind takes form. The place Kate resides as she chronicles her existence as a 'responsible monad' is a perfect site for a meditation on human existence (and the threat of extinction). Regardless of what we might think of such a notion, who is to deny that a straight, white, privileged male with a history of depression, and an obsessive relationship with language, itself responsible for the formation of meaning around categories of identification that hold all manner of implications for each and every one of us, cannot shed light on an area of human existence that continues to perplex scholars to this day.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.2 Wallace's Attack on Kathy Acker's Portrait of an Eye

Another occasion where Wallace engages with feminist discourse in relation to issues of gender is in his currently uncollected review of Kathy Acker's *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels*, which appears in the Spring 1992 edition of the *Harvard Review*.<sup>35</sup> The first paragraph of the review seems less concerned with Acker's book and more concerned with Wallace's thoughts on 'value' and 'quality' in fiction. Wallace concludes the paragraph with a list of names of authors he feels this way about. Kathy Acker's is the final name on that list, and he asks the reader to invest time into thinking about the value/quality paradox, and even influences the reader with his, at times, negative opinion of Acker as a writer.

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<sup>33</sup> Giuliana Monteverde speaks to this, and more, in a discussion of 'female complicity' and the ways in which 'existing discourses on women's participation in patriarchal practices are inadequate' (Monteverde, p. 62). Giuliana Monteverde, 'Not all Feminist Ideas are Equal: Anti-Capitalist Feminism and Female Complicity', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16 (2014), 62-75.

<sup>34</sup> Monteverde speaks to the difficulty and dangers associated with exclusionary practices where feminism's future is concerned (Monteverde, pp. 64, 69).

<sup>35</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'Review of Kathy Acker's *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels*', *Harvard Review* (1992).

Wallace gives a short biography of Acker's rise to prominence in the early 1970s, noting that she gained a 'reputation among the outerest fringes of the Greenwich Village and Bay Area avant-gardes', and positions her early works as from the Marxist-feminist camp of feminism, which lends an added sense of Acker's personal politics to the review (Wallace, *Portrait*, p. 154).

In the third paragraph, Wallace attempts to paraphrase the novels but only after informing the reader that '[a]ll of them are at once critically pretty interesting and artistically pretty crummy and actually no fun at all to read' (Wallace, *Portrait*, p.154). Wallace objects to Acker's 'plagiarism' of other well-known texts from the canon, and objects to the ways in which she adopts a radical feminist strategy of re-working said texts. In doing so, Acker problematizes the cultural history of the texts (largely male-authored), while drawing attention to the phallogentric nature of society that she takes aim at with her radical politics of resistance and anger. At this point plagiarism is just one of the performance tools that Acker uses to destabilize the canon. Fragmentation is another, where sentences are incoherent:

My revolt against the death society collides with my desire to be touched I have no identity I can feel the hand softly running up down my leg inside the leg against the sand [...] all people think about when they meet me is sex ripples of flesh to collide against the returning ripples as they enlarge into waves I give myself entirely to each desire because there's nothing else to give myself to nothing else exists I have to hide my work am I scared?<sup>36</sup>

Acker's lack of punctuation makes for a frustrating read, and it is feasible to think that Wallace may have found her work irksome. However, *WM* is also a frustrating read (as are some of Wallace's own texts), and so there are issues with Wallace's approach. Markson's text problematizes notions of history, as does Acker's, though both achieve very different ends. Wallace complains of Acker juxtaposing 'bits of faked historical autobiography from oppressed, repressed, horny women who end up murdering men, with snippets of actual autobiography from an oppressed, repressed, horny Kathy Acker who seems to get relentlessly victimized by men' (Wallace, *Portrait*, p. 154). Although the opening to Wallace's review does not bode well for Acker's text (the manner

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<sup>36</sup> Kathy Acker, *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), p. 48.



with which she sacrifices story is one example he cites when discussing an interview of Acker's with the *Mississippi Review*), in the fourth paragraph he discusses why he feels that she is important to contemporary U.S. literature.<sup>37</sup>

In Wallace's opinion, Acker is herself a trailblazer as the 'first bona fide female U.S. postmodernist, and the first American writer to see the implications of European poststructuralism [...] for the creation of a radically feminist fictional texts' [sic] (Wallace, *Portrait*, p. 154). When discussing the list of 'stuff she was up to before any other U.S. woman', Wallace includes:

[...] questioning the notions of fixed identity and static sexuality by undermining the unity and gender of the narrative subject, [...] promulgating a Derridian, feminist-friendly 'metaphysics of absence' by portraying characters as passive objects instead of active agents; and exploiting the poststructural triad of political power, sexuality and language by making all her main characters oppressed, repressed, horny women whose narrative utterances fight a holding action against erasure by a malignant, phallogentric, capitalist Society [sic] (Wallace, *Portrait*, p. 154-5).

Wallace raises the issue of questioning 'fixed identity' and the ways in which Acker disrupts notions of gender, which, though in a far subtler manner to that of Acker, is what Wallace seems also to do throughout his works of fiction—and potentially, it is this subtlety that obscures from view elements of Wallace's texts where more complex views on gender reside.<sup>38</sup> Again, the critics who have started discussions around Wallace and gender allow for this thesis to continue with a more nuanced consideration of his works. For instance, where Holland speaks always in terms of Wallace's writing being concerned with the 'opposite gender' (Holland, 'Hirsute', p. 67), and where Hayes-Brady talks in terms of 'gender and difference', both examples, here, lead a reader to believe that gender is always a question of self and other (Hayes-Brady, 'Neutral', p. 65). While there is clearly good reason for viewing Wallace's works in this way such positions do not take account of Wallace's constant return at attempting to understand perspectives that at first glance do not seem to fit with his own identity—the straight, white male. Neither do they offer the possibility for gender to form a more hybrid position, where masculinity and femininity blend

<sup>37</sup> Larry McCaffery and Kathy Acker, 'An Interview with Kathy Acker', *Mississippi Review*, 20 (1991), 83-97.

<sup>38</sup> In particular, see the chapter on *Broom*, where Lenore, Wallace's first attempt at 'cross-writing' provides a perspective from which to consider just this. However, there is a distinction to be made in Wallace's use and presentation of sexuality that differs greatly from that of Acker.

together rather than stand apart. And in his conclusion, Jackson notes the 'tension in [Wallace's] representations of gender', but accounts for this through what he sees as Wallace 'focusing near exclusively on male characters and perspectives', which this thesis argues against by focusing on the female characters and perspectives that Wallace writes through, alongside the elements where male and female characters are shown to display both masculinity and femininity (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 178).<sup>39</sup>

As for the elements of Acker's novels that Wallace dislikes, particularly with reference to the oppressed, repressed, and horny elements of the text, these are what he feels makes them literarily important, which creates a paradox in itself in that the reader must now take Wallace's initial criticisms as a form of praise. Furthermore, some aspects of the review gives rise to Wallace's own feelings about Acker that feel somewhat personal, and not necessarily appropriate for a book review appearing in the *Harvard Review*. One example is an aside where Wallace notes that '[i]t's maybe interesting that Acker's books, all of which have impressive Mapplethorpe photos of Acker striking poses on the covers, are every bit as narcissistic as those of a Mailer who simply must be Acker's foe' (Wallace, *Portrait*, p. 155). Wallace rounds off the paragraph with a word count of Acker's 'favourite' words in *Portrait*: "I" at 400+ appearances is Acker's favorite [...] far out-distancing the 2nd and 3rd place 'fuck' and 'cunt', which appear 211 and 136 times respectively' (Wallace, *Portrait*, p. 155). Here, Wallace exhibits a sensibility that does not fit with the work he will go on to publish (*Brief Interviews*) almost a decade after writing this review of Acker's work, where his mention of expletives appears prudish.

Following this, Wallace attends once more to the intellectual merits of the novels. He goes on to state that 'Acker, taking as self-evident the fact that phallogentric Society schizophrenizes women by denying them both subjectivity and active sexual expression, seeks to demonstrate and dramatize a Laingian psychosis by systematically working to decentralize (I simply refuse to say 'deconstruct') the narrative's subject' (Wallace, *Portrait*, p. 155). Again, Wallace is attuned to those sites in Acker's text where the hierarchical structure of gender and gender bias are challenged (and in relation to the use of voice in

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<sup>39</sup> A more in-depth discussion of this appears in the next chapter on *Infinite Jest*.

Acker's works we can see such a challenge when she appropriates Dickens' narrator in her own re-imagining of *Great Expectations*). When questioning the facts of phallogentric society we must ask, are they self-evident to Acker, Wallace, or both? It is evident that Wallace is familiar with the intricacies of feminist critical discourse, as shown in the previous chapters and in his review of *WM*, and Wallace follows this by stating what sound like remarkably similar feminist-inspired sentiments when he asserts that 'to be female in a phallogentric Society is to be existentially vivisected, bodi- and voice-less, with all the rage and anxiety and free-floating Continental guilt attendant on that state' (Wallace, *Portrait*, p. 155). Here, Wallace returns to the question of guilt, and of how the hierarchical binary of gender ensures that guilt manifests itself upon the female (whereas in *WM*, guilt is associated with the feminine).

### 4.3 Links with Judith Butler's Theory of Gender

Though Wallace's focus on feminine guilt is problematic for both Holland and Jackson, this example provides us with more evidence that Wallace is writing from within the boundaries of feminist critical discourse, because in this instance his analysis of Acker's strategy aligns with that of a leading figure in feminist criticism: Judith Butler. On the plight of the female subject in society Butler notes that the 'association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom' (*Trouble*, pp. 11-12). Butler notes that the female is forever tied to the body and that it is the female body that is the site of oppression, whereas to be bodi-less, as the fully disavowed male body in this instance, is to transcend such oppression. Wallace recognizes Acker's theoretical position *vis-à-vis* the corporeal and the incorporeal, which is a remarkably similar position to the one Butler presents.<sup>40</sup> This example shows once more that Wallace is attuned to the prevalence of gender bias and the gender discourse that challenges this. However, Wallace

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<sup>40</sup> The notion of the bodi-less subject is something that will be discussed further in the chapters on *Infinite Jest* and *Brief Interviews*. Here, Wallace's engagement emerges in ever more complex ways.

continues to be critical of Acker as he posits that the intellectual value he ascribes to the text is perhaps not valuable after all: '[m]aybe I'm best off claiming that Ms. Acker's three early novels are valuable for academic critics but low-quality for readers who like fiction that makes some attempt to communicate, or mean, or live. W/r/t the important-writer-but-crummy-writing problem Ms. Acker presents, it may be that it's the conundrum's implications for academic criticism itself that turn out to be grim' (Wallace, *Portrait*, p. 156). Wallace's conclusion is fairly grim in itself. However, it is not indicative of how he feels about feminist writing in general. In the same year, Wallace writes a book review of Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* (1992), which brims with admiration from the very beginning.

#### 4.4 Praise of Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold*

Wallace's review of Hustvedt's novel is also currently uncollected, first appearing in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 24, 1992, and was also published later that year in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 76.<sup>41</sup> Wallace chooses an epigraph taken from Theodore Roethke's 'Meditations of an Old Woman' to accompany the review:<sup>42</sup>

What is it to be a woman?  
To be contained, to be a vessel?  
To prefer a window to a door?  
A pool to a river? (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 1).

Again, Wallace provides an example of a questioning of gender. These words express a similar sentiment to that shown in Wallace's reviews of Markson and Acker's works, respectively, in that they speak to the same radical skepticism that questions woman's subjective and objective ontological position in society.<sup>43</sup> Wallace's immediate position on Hustvedt's novel is that '[t]he point

<sup>41</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'Review of Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold*', *The Philadelphia Enquirer* (1992).

<sup>42</sup> Theodore Roethke, 'Meditations of an Old Woman', in *Collected Poems* (1969) (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1975).

<sup>43</sup> Theodore Roethke adopts a woman's persona throughout parts of the poem, and that that also speaks to the notion of 'feminine writing' or 'cross-writing', as Wallace terms it. With respect to this, Mary Floyd-Wilson, in a discussion of *The Far Field*, believes 'that Roethke needed to enter the female's consciousness, much in the way he did in 'Meditations of an Old Woman', in order to personalize her. Mary Floyd-Wilson, 'Poetic Empathy: Theodore Roethke's Conception of Woman in the Love Poems, *South Atlantic Review* 56.1 (1991) pp. 61-78, (p.62).

of this review is going to be that *The Blindfold* is a really good book' (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 1). He adopts a youthful, almost juvenile tone when commenting that 'the first neat thing about it is that the jacket copy and blurbs are interesting' (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 1). For Wallace, one of the highlights is a blurb by Don DeLillo, an author Wallace admires hugely.<sup>44</sup>

Following a brief discussion of DeLillo's praise for the book, Wallace states that 'the most impressive thing about [the] novel is its ingenious distaff's inversion of that most haunting preoccupation of modern art-fiction, the problem of philosophical skepticism' (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 1). Once more, Wallace's engagement with a particular strand of feminist discourse is a recurring motif in his thinking, which in this instance is concerned with that of philosophical skepticism and the ontological in/security of woman, the hierarchy of the gender binary, and of the enactment of gender. Again, Jackson's views differ to those of this thesis when he contends that 'Wallace cannot be redeemed as a progressive writer on sexuality and gender', concluding that this occurs 'both despite of and because of [Wallace's] conservatism' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 179). This is to do Wallace a disservice in this particular respect when noting that in relation to Hustvedt's text he sketches the broad outline of this skepticism 'in which the integrity of the self depends on an efferent relation between the Subject as active perceiver and world as reliable Object' (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 1). He notes that 'a defining characteristic of this century's important *feminist* fictions, though, has been its obversion of the skeptical dilemma' (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 1, emphasis original). Wallace places Hustvedt and her novel in this category by not only claiming that Hustvedt's novel is an important piece of feminist fiction, but also by contrasting its merits with works written by Jean Rhys and Kathy Acker, respectively:

In contrast to Rhys, whose portraits of disintegrating female selves were prescient but sort of simplistic and freighted with a passive self-pity, and Acker, who's up on all kinds of cutting-edge French Theory but is crippled by easy anger and a penchant for cute easy formal tricks like rendering her females' ontological

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<sup>44</sup> Wallace frames Hustvedt's central themes, certain phrases, and the novel's setting as 'overwhelmingly reminiscent of DeLillo and Auster', and he subsumes Hustvedt into a literary body of work that he himself admires, even referencing those works of DeLillo's that Hustvedt's novel most speaks of, according to Wallace (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 3). Wallace also praises Hustvedt for her 'preoccupation with silence', and also for the passages of exposition that she includes when detailing such instances, which informs his own practice as his fiction progresses towards the writing of *The Pale King* (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 3).

fragmentation through sharp juxtaposition of different narratives and enraged autobiography (imagine Andrea Dworkin as a nymphomaniac and pathological liar), Hustvedt's protagonist Iris (her name both an inversion of the author's 'Siri' and, literally, a perceiving eye)<sup>45</sup> struggles to establish an actual self -- literally to make herself up -- in the face of relentless and surreal objectification by the males she's drawn to. Here the book's jacket copy is not only accurate but incisive; it describes *The Blindfold* as a story particular to our time, when a woman no longer expects to move from parents to husband but must forge a separate identity to hold at bay that which others impose upon her [*sic*] (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 2).

Once more, Wallace takes the hierarchical structure of the gender binary to task as he discusses a woman's expectations, while dismissing Rhys and Acker's works as less worthy works of feminist fiction than Hustvedt's. Wallace dislikes Rhys' use of passive self-pity, in spite of the fact that he views her work as having foresight. In Acker's case it is issues of anger and enraged autobiography that Wallace finds unappealing, though he admires her command of French Theory.

Ominous also is the comment about Andrea Dworkin, which seems inappropriate, as it is Acker's use of autobiography that irks Wallace in his review of *Portrait*. It is difficult to understand the reasons behind Wallace's substitution of Dworkin for Acker, as if the two are unproblematically interchangeable (which they are not). In an interview with Larry McCaffery, McCaffery suggests that Acker's views on men 'gets you into trouble with some feminists' (McCaffery, p. 96). Acker replies: 'I don't think the problem is with men. Take Cixous's argument against Kristeva, with Cixous saying that our problems all have their source in genital difference—so the fact that men have cocks is what makes them evil. This being so, the only thing to do is escape from men. She's a separatist. And Dworkin's position is the same [...]. I don't have any problem with guys' (McCaffery, p. 97). Acker's point here is that she is not a radical feminist that seeks the separation of men and women, as Dworkin does, so for Wallace to replace Acker with Dworkin in the above quote shows a lack of understanding of the complexities of feminism and of feminists. The involved

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<sup>45</sup> Here, there is another link with the use of 'I' (Acker's most used word; and the word Wallace uses to convey a sense of shared humanity in 'Plenum') and 'eye', the part of the body with which we perceive things.

nature of Wallace's thought, though oftentimes appearing confused in its output, where he considers issues of gender (or feminism) that are not always straightforward is what makes a more nuanced reading of his works all the more urgent. For instance, the philosophical skepticism on display in Lenore's character leads to Hayes-Brady concluding that her 'gender is largely incidental', while also pointing to the fact that Lenore's is a portrayal that is 'openly semi-autobiographical', because Lenore *is* Wallace—Wallace *is* Lenore (Hayes-Brady, 'Neutral', pp.65-6). In acknowledging this, Hayes-Brady confirms what this thesis sets out as of importance—that Wallace's use of feminist enquiry actually opens up conversations of gender hybridity rather than difference, though in doing so Wallace is trying to articulate a very difficult position and so it is highly likely that we will encounter moments of contradiction and confusion in his thought (as have been shown to be evident in his works so far).

As an instance of this, we may consider that Wallace has an aversion to a particular kind of feminism, or better still, an aversion to a particular kind of feminist (the radical kind). Rhys' biography positions her as a person for whom self-pity is a consistent feature in her life. Both Acker and Dworkin are very much from the radical feminist tradition (though they differ in approach), where anger is an emotional tool that is used throughout their respective forms of activism. In contrast, Hustvedt's biography, at least superficially (the happily married, devoted wife of Paul Auster), appears to be very different to that of Rhys, Acker, and Dworkin. Here, there is another occasion where this thesis' more nuanced approach differs to that of Jackson. When discussing Adam Kelly's thoughts on Wallace and feminism Jackson argues that Wallace responds to and 'contribute[s] to feminism by caricaturing it (as being anti-male)' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 192). Jackson also states that 'Wallace treats feminist thought as both flawed and worthy of parody. There is little evidence that he was interested in working *with* feminism in pursuit of gender equality - in fact, quite the opposite' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 192, emphasis original). This section of work on Wallace's reviews of both Acker and Hustvedt, respectively, shows that Jackson's conclusions are too broad and do not take account of the more nuanced elements of his writing. And as with both Holland and Hayes-Brady,

Jackson's thoughts on gender equality do little more than continue the notion of gender 'difference'—rather, by talking more in terms of gender hybridity questions of equality fade away and are replaced by community and similarity, where masculinity and femininity are allowed to exist in a single subject, in differing degrees and all manner of complexity. When comparing Wallace's reviews of Acker's and Hustvedt's works, it is evident that one is more focused on the biography of the author (Acker), and the other focuses more on the text (Hustvedt), yet both novels are similar in terms of thematic content, as Wallace highlights in his discussion of philosophical skepticism.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, both engage with issues of feminism, and of issues of gender, which once more stands in contrast to Jackson's thoughts on Wallace's works.

Of the four-page review of *The Blindfold*, most of the second and third pages are taken up with an analysis of the text. An example of this is Wallace's comment on the way *The Blindfold* is '[w]ritten in self-consciously simple English, this intricate novel's best complexity is the neurasthenic Iris's ambivalence about her objectification by Others -- all of whom both attract and repel her --- so that she's split not only existentially but emotionally' [*sic*] (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 2). Again, Wallace focuses on the issue of the objectification of women as a motif. Hustvedt does write in a more conventional sense than Acker (in that her sentences are there to push the narrative along, rather than to frustrate the reader). Compare this with some of the comments Wallace makes during his review of Acker's *Portrait*: '[a]mong the reasons Ms. Acker is indisputably important to contemporary U.S. literature'; 'Ms. Acker's especially and deservedly important now'; '[m]y trouble with Ms. Acker'; 'Acker should have to hand over 15% of every royalty-dollar to the authors of *Anti-Oedipus*'; '[s]he constructs a series of false autobiographies of historically real women who are about as different from Acker as any women could be - meek, demure, passive [...] and juxtaposes them with contextless bits of actual ([...] petty and banal) Kathy Acker autobio'; and finally, '[m]aybe a reader's numb spanked distant confusion is just the effect Ms. Acker is after' (Wallace, *Portrait*,

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<sup>46</sup> And this is also true of Wallace's review of *WM*, where the thematic content is similar but where details of Markson biography are sparse.



pp. 154-6).<sup>47</sup> Wallace's comments uphold the opinion that he focuses far too much on Acker's biography and not enough on the text itself. This is especially frustrating when we consider that Acker, like Hustvedt, is framing a discussion around women's objectification and the gender-biased framework that assists in this.

With respect to Hustvedt's work, Wallace believes Iris to be split not only existentially but emotionally, and he follows this with: 'This seems real' (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 2). Real is a loaded term fraught with issues, for it suggests something genuine, which is at odds with the fact that he is discussing a fictional character's feelings. With these words, we begin to understand that for Wallace, authenticity in a text, though problematic, is of importance. In much the same manner as in his reading of Markson's text, Hustvedt's novel speaks to Wallace of something tangible, where he connects emotionally with the protagonist, Iris, and therefore engages with her philosophical position, just as he did with Kate in *WM*. Again, we can only surmise that it is the issue of biographical detail that clouds Wallace's judgment of Acker and her works. However, if this is the case it raises an interesting problem when considering Acker's role as a performance artist and activist, which feeds directly into her fiction. Acker is hyper-aware of her own actions and of their effects on others: and has been since she was a child dreaming of becoming a pirate. This is where Acker realizes she never can (become a pirate) because in a world of gender bias, 'only men become pirates'.<sup>48</sup> Once more, Wallace's negative fixation on Acker's biography appears heightened because of Acker's awareness of her own self-consciousness, and of her tendency to turn everyday situations into performative acts. This begs the question: can Acker be separated from the performative, and if so, how do we know who the 'real' Kathy Acker is? The leading question concerning Wallace's critique of Acker's works must be: how sure can we be that Wallace is commenting on Acker the person, not Acker the

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<sup>47</sup> During the review Wallace refers to the *Mississippi Review* interview that Acker gives. No matter how 'disingenuous' Wallace feels Acker is in her responses to McCaffery's 'pretentious' questions, Acker is very clear about her intentions: 'I wasn't interested in 'saying' anything in my work. The only thing I could use my works to say is 'I don't want to say things!' I couldn't say anything beyond that' (McCaffery, p. 90).

<sup>48</sup> Anon., *Kathy Acker*, <http://www.illustratedwomeninhistory.com/post/138216263495/kathy-acker-was-an-american-experimental> (2016) [Accessed 2 December 2019]

performance artist? In short, we cannot be sure, and so Wallace's critique is marred by uncertainty.

Less uncertain is the assertion of Wallace's that Hustvedt's work is superior to that of Acker and Rhys in its attempts at conveying a sense of philosophical skepticism, although Wallace's praise for Hustvedt is not unwavering as he tackles her 'clunky' prose that sounds like it is 'poorly translated from a foreign language' (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 4). In spite of this, Wallace concludes that Hustvedt's *Blindfold* is 'a clear bright sign that the feminist and postmodern traditions in America are far from exhausted', which recommends it to readers in a way that he does not do with Acker's work and demonstrates that Wallace favours Hustvedt's austere realism over Acker's ostentatious experiments (Wallace, *Blindfold*, p. 4). It is clear that Wallace places a great deal of emphasis on the need to critique culturally accepted notions of gender, such as the enactment of gender, and of how those notions tend towards a hierarchical structure of the gender binary. However, it is also apparent that Wallace is critical of radical feminism, judging by his views of Kathy Acker and Andrea Dworkin, respectively, even though his understanding of the complexity of the term is problematic.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

A brief consideration of Wallace's film review of *Terminator 2*, 'The (As it Were) Seminal Importance of *Terminator 2*' (1991), reinforces Wallace's preoccupation with issues of gender discourse.<sup>49</sup> Soon into the review Wallace's discusses one of the film's protagonists, Sarah Connor, and laments feminist scholars for having not 'paid more attention to Cameron and his early collaborator Gale Ann Hurd [... and that] *The Terminator* and *Aliens* were both violent action films with tough, competent female protagonists (incredibly rare) whose toughness and competence in no way diminished their 'femininity' (even more rare, unheard of), a femininity that is rooted (along with both films thematics) in notions of maternity rather than just sexuality' (Wallace,

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<sup>49</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'The (as it were) Seminal Importance of *Terminator 2* (1991)', in *Both Flesh and Not* (2012), pp. 177-192.

'Seminal', p. 178). Here is another example of Wallace condemning feminists for not focusing on matters that he feels may advance the feminist cause, which is particularly relevant given that he is writing this around the time that both Butler and Sedgwick produce their most important works on gender and sexuality, arguably. The frustrating element of Wallace's discussion is that he places the comments about women actors in action movies in the footnotes, which reduces their impact on the reader (in much the same way as he does in 'Big Red Son' around the fervent anti-pornography sentiments).

Once more there are issues with Wallace's terminology throughout the review. The title itself may cause offence because of the use of seminal and its etymological ties with semen. Also, there is the fact that Wallace describes this type of blockbuster film as 'F/X Pornography', because of its focus on 'half a dozen or so isolated, spectacular scenes [...] strung together via another sixty to ninety minutes of flat, dead, and often hilariously insipid narrative' (Wallace, 'Seminal', p. 178).<sup>50</sup> There is also Wallace's description of *Aliens* as having 'the most terrifying Teeming Rapacious Horde scenes of all time', where Wallace correctly identifies that the rape-like act by the aliens, of penetration and the subsequent implant of a foetus-like organism into a host, does not discriminate between men and women—both are fair game.<sup>51</sup>

Wallace's championing of Cameron's female protagonists (and complaint that feminist scholars have not done so) reaches its apex as he decries the fact that 'Sigourney Weaver didn't win the '86 Oscar for her lead in Cameron's *Aliens*. Marlee Matlin indeed. No male lead in the history of U.S. action film even approaches Weaver's second Ripley for emotional depth and sheer balls—she makes Stallone, Willis, et al look muddled and ill' ('Seminal', p. 180, emphasis original).<sup>52</sup> Wallace effectively dismisses one of the most macho film characters, and one of the most gratuitously violent films of the early 1980s, Stallone's *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), while also dismissing another uber-macho character, Willis' John McLean from *Die Hard* (1988). To recognize Weaver's

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<sup>50</sup> Wallace's phrasing links to his essay on pornography in that the 'special effects' of *Terminator 2* act like the sex scenes in pornography films, whereas the bulk of the viewing is 'insipid' at best.

<sup>51</sup> This is a concept that I argue is present in Wallace's *Brief Interviews* collection of short stories.

<sup>52</sup> Marlee Matlin won her Best Actress Oscar for her role in *Children of a Lesser God*, and her performance is widely described as portraying that of a beautiful but embittered deaf girl, hardly on a par with Sigourney Weaver's 'balls', as it were.

contribution to U.S. blockbuster action films, and the tension between notions of masculinity and femininity, while noting how her performance was overlooked by the American Academy is yet another example of Wallace's concern with gender discourse.

This chapter begins with Wallace's long-form essay on *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, where yet again, gender is pivotal to Wallace's consideration of Markson's novel of ideas around Hellenic guilt and notions of 'falling'. Following this, a trio of shorter reviews by Wallace demonstrates the extent to which Wallace is continually drawn to issues of gender discourse and gender relations, though fraught and complex at times, and also how this is interpreted by critics such as Holland, Hayes-Brady, and Jackson, as demonstrating Wallace's politics of gender 'difference' and also a negative engagement with feminism. This chapter goes some way to adding to those conversations by providing a more nuanced discussion that problematizes such assessment of Wallace's works. The essay and reviews discussed here appear a few years after the publication of *The Broom of the System*, a novel that conducts its own engagement with issues of philosophical skepticism through the characterization of Lenore Beadsman Jr., Wallace's first major female character—the semi-autobiographical version of Wallace himself. Although Wallace deemed the novel a failure, retrospectively, in terms of what he set out to accomplish, there are interesting connections to be made with the non-fiction works that have been analyzed in this chapter, particularly with respect to Wallace's reflections on and engagement with philosophical skepticism, gender discourse, and with the enactment of gender. The following chapter on Wallace's *magnum opus*, *Infinite Jest*, continues to explore these concerns further and starts to explore in earnest Wallace's creativity around the notion of gender hybridity.

## 5. DISRUPTING NOTIONS of GENDER FIXITY in *INFINITE JEST*

This chapter demonstrates the ways in which narrative voice disrupts notions of gender fixity, thus allowing for a more fluid concept of gender to develop—Judith Butler’s theories around gender are key, here, as is Eve Sedgwick’s lasting influence on Wallace from her impactful arrival at Amherst in the mid-1980s. A cross-section of the characters is considered in order to explicate this concept—men and women, major and minor, voiced and voiceless. Starting with a consideration of the performativity of gender, through Orin Incandenza and Hugh/Helen Steeply and their subsequent interactions, the chapter examines the notion of gender melancholia. Following this, a look at the ways in which the text subverts and disrupts axioms of gender, before a detailed analysis of the major women of *Infinite Jest*.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the notion of the fluidity of gender is considered, continuing on from *The Broom of the System* and Wallace’s non-fiction (essays and reviews) but in a more sustained manner, where masculinity and femininity are seen to combine in characters, enabling a more complex reading of the novel.<sup>2</sup>

A major element of the text that affects this reading is Wallace’s use of the visual to direct the reader’s gaze and therefore attention, the way a camera might influence viewers of TV shows, for example. This is crucial when

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest: A Novel* (London: Abacus, 2009). All subsequent in-text references to this text marked solely by p. or pp.

<sup>2</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 2011).

considering Wallace's own thoughts on the complex relationship of spectatorship in the United States of America. During an interview with Larry McCaffery (1993) Wallace discusses what he sees as the limitations of TV, with respect to its aim of providing viewers with what they want, thus never challenging audiences to consider other viewpoints:

What TV is extremely good at—and realize that this is *all it does*—is discerning what large numbers of people think they want, and supplying it. And since there's always been a strong and distinctive American distaste for frustration and suffering, TV's going to avoid these like the plague in favour of something anesthetic and easy.<sup>3</sup>

Here, TV is positioned as a medium that is ineffective at providing anything other entertainment, because it responds only to the audiences likes, not its dislikes. Clare Hayes Brady, in a discussion of the novel's 'failures', views *Infinite Jest* as offering a contrast to TV's obsession with pleasing audiences:

Failure itself was a recurrent theme of the writing: *Infinite Jest* went under the working title of *A Failed Entertainment* because for Wallace 'the book is structured as an entertainment that doesn't work. Because what entertainment ultimately leads to, I think, is the movie *Infinite Jest*', which implicitly positions entertainment ... in opposition to communication ... [F]ailure marks the continuation of human thought, whereas success leads to atrophy of will and the inevitable choice of death by pleasure. By contrast, the central failure of the novel is ultimately a symbolically productive one: ... the central absence of the novel becomes a repository of possibilities, not a univocal object but a play of potentialities.<sup>4</sup>

Effectively, *Infinite Jest* (the novel) aims for failure through its relation to entertainment, because the alternative is to provide its audience (readership) with a reproduction of TV's effect, a kind of death by pleasure, which is exactly what *Infinite Jest* (the film) provides for its viewers. In a further quote taken from the McCaffery interview, Wallace expands upon what he sees as TV's failings:

With televised images, we can have the facsimile of a relationship without the work of a real relationship. It's an anesthesia of *form*. The interesting thing is why we're so desperate for this anesthetic

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<sup>3</sup> Larry McCaffery, 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13 (1993), 127-150, (p. 128).

<sup>4</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), pp. 2-3.

against loneliness. ... I'm not sure I could give you a steeple-fingered theoretical justification, but I strongly suspect a big part of real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny (McCaffery, p. 136, emphasis original).

For Wallace, fiction is a medium that makes room for those things an audience wishes to deny, what it sees as dreadful. This speaks of an inability, on the audience's part, to want to have its views challenged, hinting at a kind of immaturity at the heart of US spectatorship. This thought proves useful as a more in-depth analysis of the novel begins with a discussion of Orin Incandenza. Following on from *Broom*, where almost a decade has passed between publications, Wallace's burgeoning interest in gender and gender relations reaches a more nuanced level in *Infinite Jest*.

### 5.1 Gender Melancholia

Orin Incandenza is described as a successful sports-figure, and is the eldest son of Avril and Jim Incandenza. His relationship with Joelle van Dyne, the Prettiest-Girl-of-all-Time, leads to her meeting his father, with whom she forms a relationship. Subsequently, she becomes the central figure in Jim Incandenza's lethal film, *Infinite Jest*. Orin's character exhibits overt displays of masculinity, as he reduces the women he dates to that of mere subjects (ironically intended as objects but always referred to as 'Subjects'): they seem useful to him only in terms of the sexual satisfaction that they offer. However, when the intricacies of these encounters are analysed closely it is possible to find numerous occasions where the motivational drive behind Orin's experiences provides scope for a less conventional reading of gender, with respect to Orin's performativity of gender. For the purpose of this study, Orin's relationship with women is divided into three distinct areas of concern. The first is Orin's obsessive quest to find young, attractive, sexually promiscuous women with which to engage in casual sex. The second is the curious relationship that forms between Orin and Hugh/Helen Steeply, as Hugh/Helen conducts 'interviews' with Orin for

*Moment* magazine. And finally, there is Orin's perceived lack of a relationship with his mother, Avril.

Though Orin is constantly seeking new subjects it is apparent that the subsequent sexual encounters fail to satiate him. The fact that Orin is introduced to the reader in this manner, emphasising his 'sexuality', is significant. There is an air of melancholia about Orin—indeed, the narrative details the difficulties that Orin faces upon waking each morning. His experience of getting through the day and the subsequent sleep that follows is likened to that of Sisyphus' ascent and fall, as he finds himself in bed sheets soaked in sweat, despite air-conditioning that keeps the room so cold that to walk on the floor is painful (p. 46). Orin's womanising appears to cause him a good deal of 'psychic pain', as indicated in the description of his waking following a one-night stand where he is 'alone at 0730h. amid a damp scent of Ambush and on the other side's dented pillow a note with phone # and vital data in loopy schoolgirlish hand. There's also Ambush on the note' (p. 43). It is clear from this that Orin feels like he has been 'ambushed' by the now absent subject and that she is the predator, not the prey (the subjects are always anonymous and generic).<sup>5</sup> There is something animalistic about this, given the fragrance's name and the way that he wakes to find himself enveloped in the subject's miasma. Orin is always the one who instigates such casual encounters, and sex is the sole reason for doing so. The reasons behind Orin's pain are ambiguous, yet they appear to be hereditary, as his father is said to have experienced extreme unhappiness at a similar age to that of Orin (p. 46).

After the disclosure of Orin's difficulties upon wakening, the reader is told that Orin attempts to eat his breakfast, but that he 'sits there in dumb animal pain', which adds to the view of Orin as prey (p. 43). The majority of the women that Orin is attracted to are young mothers. Orin's relationship with his own mother is largely non-existent and he isolates himself from the rest of the family, with the exception of his brother Hal. There is little explanation of the reasons for this behaviour and so his character remains speculative, in a sense. The nature of this estrangement can be read in a typically Oedipal manner when considering Avril's encounter with John Wayne, as witnessed by Pemulis (pp.

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<sup>5</sup> Indicating the effect the subject has left on Orin's own subjectivity, perhaps.



552-3). Avril is dressed in a cheerleader's outfit while 'doing near-splits on the heavy shag', while John Wayne is *almost* dressed in football uniform, wearing 'a football helmet and light shoulderpads and a Russell athletic supporter and socks and shoes and nothing else' (p. 552). There is something inappropriate (perhaps even illegal) about the encounter because John Wayne is a student at Avril's tennis academy. The staged nature of the proceedings appears to be an attempt on Avril's part to mimic Orin and Joelle's relationship when they first encounter one another—Orin the football star, and Joelle the cheerleader. There are questions concerning Avril's desire to want to perform in a role that positions her as her son's lover, metaphorically. However, to read this purely as a sign of incestuous longing is to overlook the presumptions that are formed prior to the apparent logic of Freud's Oedipus complex.

Judith Butler, in 'Melancholy Gender', rightly notes that '[t]he oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been accomplished'.<sup>6</sup> The boy's longing for his mother as a sexual partner, only to be discouraged as incestuous, is then transferred onto any other suitable (non-familial) woman, ensuring that the subsequent gender binary pairing maintains heterosexual expectations. Butler clarifies that 'Freud articulates a cultural logic whereby gender is achieved and stabilized through the accomplishment of heterosexual positioning and where the threats to heterosexuality thus become threats to gender itself' (Butler, 'Melancholy', p. 6). Butler is at pains to maintain that this is an exaggerated position, but that it is a necessary one to adopt in order to consider the effects of 'ungrievable loss' on the 'gendered character of the ego' (Butler, 'Melancholy', pp. 6-7). Here, Butler's thoughts turn to those things that are not accounted for in the Oedipus complex. Freud's relationship triangle does not allow for a girl to desire her mother, or for a boy to desire his father, which if this were the case would allow for the formation of same-sex relations to occur as unproblematically as heterosexual relations are allowed to occur currently. Critical to Butler's thinking is the notion that Freud's Oedipus complex dictates that the act of 'becoming' a gendered subject necessitates the repudiation of desire for those of the same-sex, which speaks of socially

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, 'Melancholy gender—refused Identification', in *Gender in Psychoanalytic Space: Between Clinic and Culture*, ed. by Muriel Dimen and Virginia Goldner (New York: Other Press, LLC, 2002), pp. 3-20, (p. 6).

acceptable sexual roles, and which also infers that there are non-socially acceptable sexual roles (Butler, 'Melancholy', pp. 7-8). However, there is another way to consider Butler's thoughts when acknowledging that the process of gender formation requires the presence of a gendered 'other', and that the repudiation of this other may also manifest itself as a kind of melancholia. Throughout Wallace's fiction there exists an array of melancholic characters, and so Butler's thoughts prove useful in hypothesising the reasons behind these prevalent examples of sadness.<sup>7</sup>

Portraying the intricacies and intimacies of relationships is not one of Wallace's strong points as a writer. Instead, he tends to focus on the trials and problems of such relations.<sup>8</sup> Orin provides us with a good deal more information about relationships and desires than most other characters within Wallace's fiction. As a result, this allows for hypotheses to form around the reasons behind Orin's melancholia, and via Butler's thoughts on the topic there is a methodology with which to approach the text. Butler views 'hyperbolic and defensive [...] masculine identification' as a marker of 'disavowed grief' for the gender that is repudiated as an object of desire, and this is apt because Orin fits this description of masculine identity with respect to his overt womanising (Butler, 'Melancholy', p. 11). Indeed, Stephen Delfino casts Orin 'as the epitome of normative, hyperbolically male sexuality', and so his character aligns with Butler's example.<sup>9</sup> Here, there is occasion to deviate from Butler's approach by considering the feelings that arise from the loss of gender, which occur in the process of accepting one's own gender (when following Freud's logic with respect to the Oedipus complex). There is also a further argument to consider, which links back to Dr Jay's theory that a person is always made up of 'half-sperm' (and part-ovum), thus emphasizing fluidity and connection rather than the separation model that Freud proposes.

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<sup>7</sup> This not exhaustive list includes, Lenore Beadsman, Hal Incandenza, Orin Incandenza, Jim Incandenza, Don Gately, Joelle van Dyne, and Kate Gompert, along with many of the characters in *Brief Interviews* and *The Pale King*.

<sup>8</sup> And the relationships shown are dysfunctional, often abusive, whether emotionally, physically, or sexually, thus there is little room for intimacy between partners to form. Jim and Avril, and Orin and Joelle, respectively, are good examples of this, where the relationships have already broken down. In such instances the reader is presented with the issues of the breakdown in relations (the aftermath), and this becomes the primary focus.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew S. Delfino, *Becoming the New Man in Post-Postmodernist Fiction: Portrayals of Masculinities in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest and Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008), (p. 12).

When hypotheses favour prescriptive heterosexual tendencies, as Butler sets out in her discussion of Freud, gender is used to reify notions of heterosexuality as the dominant mode. The embryo is the primary site of loss, whereby societal convention dictates that a subject must become 'self' through its disavowal of the 'other'—society does not allow for Dr Jay's thinking. For example, an embryo's move to man necessarily leads to a move away from woman (and vice versa). Subsequently, the masculinity expected of the man leads to an expected repudiation of femininity (and vice versa). This acts as a springboard for thinking about the ways in which grieving for such a loss can be conceptualized in a manner similar to the one Butler suggests—in relation to the object of desire. There exists the possibility that loss will cause melancholia in the gendered subject, and that for some there may exist a longing to appropriate the 'other'.

For example, Orin's endless quest for one-night sexual encounters with young mothers need not only signify a conventional, Freudian notion of oedipal attraction, but may point towards a desire or longing to experience *as* the other gender. These one-night stands cannot be dismissed as merely the actions of a person seeking the physical relief of casual sex without commitment precisely because they do not bring Orin relief at all. Instead, by adapting Butler's model of melancholy gender we may view Orin's obsessive sexual encounters as a form of performativity that stems from his desire to appropriate the feminine, itself repressed by societal constraints of gendered thinking. The alleged differentiation that occurs in the embryo to determine biological sex is seized upon in order to inform societal notions of gender—that man must be masculine and that woman must be feminine—thus supporting heterosexual expectations of the relationships that arise as a result. This in turn provides 'rigid forms of gender and sexual identification [that...] appear to spawn forms of melancholy as their consequence', according to Butler (Butler, 'Melancholy', p. 13). Whereas Butler is invested solely in theorising homosexuality, as underpinning heterosexuality via the gender melancholy that arises from the disavowed grief felt at the loss of gender, this reading allows further ambiguity to arise, where the object of Orin's desire may be his mother, young women in

general, himself, or any combination of these. At any one time Orin may perform masculinity, femininity, or an amalgamation of each.

When considering Orin's experiences of sexual encounters and of his sexual attraction to others, there is opportunity to discuss Arthur Flannigan's thoughts on male embryo development. Flannigan suggests that there is the potential for life-long antipathy toward the mother, as 'the male (in order to achieve masculinity) has to oppose the maternal and distinguish himself from the maternal differently and to a different degree and with different consequences than the female'.<sup>10</sup> A conventional reading of this may reflect Orin's relationship with his mother, where a distinct dislike of her is exhibited. This position is problematized when noting that Flannigan's thoughts on biological essentialism are unproven (following on from the French Feminists), and also when considering the obsessive attraction that Orin displays as he seeks out young mothers for one-night stands (with the obvious exception of Joelle). On the one hand this may speak of a kind of misogyny originating in the womb, as Flannigan suggests, in that Orin wishes to punish young mothers in general. Conversely, the reader is told that during such sexual encounters:

Orin can only give, not receive, pleasure, and this makes a contemptible number of them think he is a wonderful lover, almost a dream-type lover; and this fuels the contempt. But he cannot show the contempt, since this would pretty clearly detract from the Subject's pleasure.

Because the Subject's pleasure in him has become his food, he is conscientious in the consideration and gentleness he shows after coitus, making clear his desire to stay right there very close and be intimate [...] (p. 596).

There is an oddly abstract effect in the expression, 'the Subject', which is not gender-specific and suggests an almost clinical point of view of the situation. In a pathological sense, Orin displays a negative strength of feeling towards the women, indicated in the use of the word contempt, but this is written as *the* contempt not *his* contempt, and so we may read this as an indication of the general contempt that certain men exhibit towards women.<sup>11</sup> This implied hatred is tied, oddly, to Orin's own feelings of sustenance that arise from giving

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur Flannigan Saint-Aubin, 'The Male Body and Literary Metaphors for Masculinity', *Theorizing Masculinities*, 5 (1994), 239, (p. 256).

<sup>11</sup> See *Brief Interviews* chapter for more of this. David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001).

sexual pleasure to the women. In turn, there is ambivalence in the desire he shows post-coitus, as if he wishes the experience not to end. Orin's giving of pleasure is complex, and not explained sufficiently in the text. In lieu of the sexual pleasure that he is unable to accept during such encounters, the gift of pleasure can be conceived of as a gift that he wishes to give to himself—this is his 'food', indicating that he is trying to internalize something by way of consumption. Yet the women fail to recognize this and the contempt grows. Is Orin attempting to pleasure the women in a way that he may wish to be pleased if he were a woman? Is this what the endless one night stands signify—an attempt at appropriating the Other? In this sense, Orin displays signs of melancholy at the gender he is not allowed to experience, according to societal expectations based upon heterosexual coupling. As a man he cannot access the subject position of a woman, and because conventional custom dictates that the feminine is tied to woman, society bars him from this also—causing him melancholia.

Another example that substantiates the claim that Orin feels melancholia for the gender he disavows in becoming a man appears in the discussion of Orin's proclivity for watching short videos of himself playing football. The videos are a product of Joelle's fascination with filmmaking during her move away from cheerleading Orin's football team (Orin watches images of himself as seen through the eyes of an 'other'):

Orin liked to [...] watch her ten-second clips of him over and over. He saw something different each time he rewound, something more. The clips of him unfolded like time-lapsing flowers and seemed to reveal him in ways he could never have engineered. He sat rapt. It only happened when he watched them alone. Sometimes he got an erection. He never masturbated; Joelle came home (p. 298).

It is through his relationship with Joelle that Orin's apparent discovery of himself is possible. Perhaps Joelle's subject position as a woman allows her to recognize in Orin something that he has failed to notice himself (though Joelle appears unaware of her intervention in this respect). The fact that he sits alone, engrossed by images of himself suggests that Orin *can* provide his own pleasure when necessary. It also speaks of the enjoyment of sports' viewing (which links back to Wallace's discussion of TV in the McCaffery interview), where Orin

reflects on his own technique and performance as an athlete. Whereas he cannot receive pleasure but only gives pleasure to the women he seduces, and feels contempt as a result, here, Orin is sexually aroused at the sight of himself—and it is crucial that Orin views himself through Joelle's viewpoint. Additionally, the fact that he does not masturbate is a sign of the rejection of his own body, in terms of the desire he feels. For Orin, the man's body is not where his pleasure interests lie (which rejects casting a purely homosexual fantasy onto this particular incident). Hence, the attention and care he gives when pleasuring women, sexually, demonstrates Orin's fascination with women's bodies.

There may be occasion to read Lacan's mirror stage around Orin's apparent narcissism. Indeed, Delfino uses this approach when stating that 'Orin watches himself in order to recognize his own existence', but this is a reading that always leads to predictable conclusions around issues of solipsism, in this case, and at once sounds too solemn for Orin's character (Delfino, p. 27). Delfino's discussion of solipsism refers to Catherine Nichols' discussion of the same, where Nichols also leans heavily on the mirror stage to form her conclusions.<sup>12</sup> Delfino and Nichols both choose the following quote from *Infinite Jest* to substantiate their claims, yet it seems that they only see gender 'normative' outcomes stemming from the text:

[W]hy, maybe one Subject is never enough, why hand after hand must descend to pull him back from the endless fall. For were there for him just one, now, special and only, the One would be not he or she but what was between them, the obliterating trinity of You and I into We. Orin felt that once and has never recovered, and will never again (pp. 566-7).

For Orin, it is the state of sexual union with a woman that affords him a glimpse of the thing he desires yet cannot articulate or capture fully (the women are rarely named, so it seems any woman will do, as long as she is physically attractive). The combination of 'you and I into we' brings about a feeling that, in this particular instance, the melding of a man with a woman gives rise to a new form of subjectivity, one that embraces the male *and* the female, the feminine *and* the masculine in equal measure (concurring with Dr Jay's 'half-sperm'

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine Nichols, 'Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Critique Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 43 (2001), 3.

analogy). The desire to achieve this state acts as a metaphor for the longing that Orin feels but cannot achieve. The quote above is the only detailed and sustained example in the novel from the many sexual encounters Orin has with various young women. To consider the ways in which Butler's notion of melancholy gender informs my reading of gender as a form of loss, it is necessary to consider what occurs as Orin delivers unparalleled sexual pleasure to this particular subject:

They have shifted into a sexual mode. Her lids flutter; his close. There's a concentrated tactile languor. [...] It is not about conquest or forced capture. It is not about glands or instincts or the split-second shiver and clench of leaving yourself; nor about love or about whose love you deep down desire, by whom you feel betrayed. Not and never love, which kills what needs it. It feels to the punter to be about hope, an immense, wide-as-the-sky hope of finding a something in each Subject's fluttering face, a something the same that will propitiate hope, [...] the need to be assured that for a moment he *has* her, now has *won* her as if from someone or something else, [...] that it is not conquest but surrender, [...] nothing but this one second's love of her, *of-her*, [...] not his but *her* love, that he has *it*, [...] that for one second she loves him too much to stand it, that she *must* [...] have him, must take him inside or else dissolve into worse than nothing; [...] that there is now inside her a vividness vacuumed of all but his name: O., O. That he is the One (p. 566).

There is an increasing self-consciousness in the language as the narrator attempts to define ever more clearly the events unfolding, and as, once more, the description leads back to Orin's consideration of himself—at once, the repetition of 'O' is onomatopoeic of the female orgasm, is suggestive of a void, and also of Orin's extreme sense of individuality as the 'one'.<sup>13</sup> The two bodies appear to merge at the vital climactic moment, according to the narrator's version of events. However, if the two are becoming one, the tortuous rhetoric on display is heavily weighted in favour of Orin's consciousness. The performativity of the coupling stems from their 'shifting' into the mode required, where initially the emphasis is on what the encounter 'is not' signifying. The stress is on hope, and in what Orin hopes to find in each subject

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<sup>13</sup> There are similarities with this representation of O and Dominique Aury's pseudonymously written novel, *The Story of O* (1954): Pauline Réage, *The Story of O*, trans. by Sabine d'Estreé (New York: Ballantine, 1965). See also Geraldine Bedell, *I Wrote the Story of O*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jul/25/fiction.features3> (The Guardian, 2004); and Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974).

at just the right moment (alluding to the magazine Helen Steeply writes for). Predictable language of 'having' and 'winning' describes the encounter, but is complicated by the fact that the narrator specifies that conquest is not that is the aim but surrender, which speaks of a passivity that does not befit a hypermasculine sex-addict. Orin stresses a need for her love, as a necessary aspect of the coupling, and that without it the performance is incomplete. The union that forms between them at the point of ecstasy is the blend of man and woman, of masculine and feminine—the two form a whole, identified by the 'O' of Orin's name, the 'oh' of the climax, and this circularity provides Orin with the illusion that he is the 'One', whole, complete.

The text points to the equation that both Delfino and Nichols rely on in their reading, in relation to ideas of solipsism. However, key to this passage is the combination of the first person singular, I, with the second person singular/plural, you, to form the first person plural, we (I + you = we)—a state that Orin has experienced only once in his life, and that he never recovers from. Hence, the endless quest for the perfect subject and the need to attempt to replicate it. There exists the possibility of reading Orin's 'Subjects' less as objects and more as an attempt to form (perform) a subjectivity that combines man and woman (both half-sperm), masculine and feminine, and that this is driven by a variation of the melancholia that accompanies gender, as Butler suggests. In fact, the narrator specifies that the contempt that Orin feels is as much about hope and need as it is about hate (p. 567). It is the need for 'her' that Orin fears, the total reliance on another subject that has the potential to help him form the ultimate union: you and I into we.<sup>14</sup> The fear that the narrator speaks of is not explained fully, yet we can surmise that it is the fear of the Other that Orin feels—he needs the woman, and needs the feminine, yet society tells him that his position as a man should be antagonistic (indicated most strongly in his lack of a relationship with Avril). There are moments where this antagonism is seen in the text, where Orin performs in a typically chauvinistic manner. For example, following the introduction of hatred as an aspect of Orin's contempt:

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<sup>14</sup> Yet there is also something unsettling about this connection, as a moment of spectacle to be observed (see comment on mirror, momentarily).



[H]e does the thing with her buttons, touches the blouse as if it too were part of her, and him. [...] Her mouth is glued to his mouth; she is his breath, his eyes shut against the sight of hers. They are stripped in the mirror and she [...] uses O.'s uneven shoulders as support to leap and circle his neck with her legs (p. 567).

Close to the moment of perfect union between the two, where their mouths are joined, and where her breath is also his, indicates something akin to a verbal moment between the two. As the union reaches its climax the mirror is mentioned, once more indicating that viewing is a part of the proceedings, but without specifying who the viewer is. This cannot be dismissed as Orin once more exhibiting narcissistic behaviour, for his eyes are closed. Yet, for all the beauty that may exist in this moment, the narrator's voice undercuts proceedings: 'she arches her back and is supported, her weight, by just one hand at the small of the back as he bears her to bed as would a waiter a tray' (p. 567). A generous reading of the simile may link the imagery with Orin's feelings of sustenance, but the overall effect brings the performance crashing down, which mimics the endless fall that Orin feels accompanies his existence. Just as Orin attempts to escape the confines of a subjectivity informed by societally guided notions of gender (by joining with the feminine other to form a new kind of subjectivity that allows for the coexistence of masculinity and femininity) the narrative conforms to societal expectations based around conventionally gendered notions of subjectivity, where man is expected to display forms of masculinity, and where Dr Jay's theory of a subjectivity that is always only ever 'half-sperm' retreats from view.

## 5.2 Disrupting Gender

An aspect of the text that does not follow conventional notions of gender is Hugh/Helen Steeply's character, whose journey from manhood to womanhood is as unconventional as it is peculiar. Remy Marathe is the counter-agent to Hugh Steeply, and during Marathe's experience of 'Goethe's well-known *'Brockengespenst'* phenomenon', while on an outcropping halfway up a

mountain overlooking Tucson, Arizona, Hugh Steeply literally falls into the scene dressed in women's clothing, lending a farcical effect to the proceedings (p. 88). Marathe's point of view and *Quebecois* English dialect influence the third person narration, where Steeply presents as a figure ridiculed for his womanly attire.<sup>15</sup> Steeply's entrance is used for comedic effect prior to the description of his physical appearance. The reader is told of 'the unmistakable yelp of an individual's impact with a cactus' (p. 88). What we appear to witness is not only Steeply's literal fall down the mountain slope, but also the precursor to a figurative fall across gender, to quote Wallace's use of the phrase in 'The Empty Plenum'.<sup>16</sup> Marathe watches Steeply's 'clumsy sliding descent', as 'Hugh Steeply descended, falling twice [...] as the Unspecified Services field-operative's fall and slide [...] carried him upon his bottom down onto the outcropping and then nearly all the way out and off it' (p. 88). With so many direct references to falling, and the obvious connotations that this brings of falling from grace and from innocence, Marathe saves Steeply from the ultimate fall (death), and the process of Steeply's transformation from man to woman begins, albeit slowly. A key element of this metamorphosis is Steeply's growing awareness of the performativity of gender, which affects how others view him: as a woman.<sup>17</sup>

The change in Steeply is gradual, and at first he seems merely to be a figure of fun—a character open to mockery because of the way he dresses.<sup>18</sup> Marathe's point of view increasingly affects the narrator's reading of events, and seems to confirm the view of Steeply as an object of fun. Indeed, the text uses imagery not commonplace when discussing a character referred to by the pronouns 'he' and 'his'. The initial description tells that 'Steeply's skirt was pulled obscenely up and his hosiery full of runs and stubs of thorns' (p. 88). Instantly, we infer that there exists a prevalent view in society that insists upon skirts covering certain parts of the anatomy, and that for those parts not to be covered is obscene, according to Marathe's point of view. There is an evident

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<sup>15</sup> It must also be noted that Marathe's use of *Quebecois* English vernacular is also used for comedic effect—and so the pair may be considered as objects of fun for the reader at this point.

<sup>16</sup> David Foster Wallace, 'The Empty Plenum: David Markson's Wittgenstein's Mistress', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 10 (1990), 217-239.

<sup>17</sup> And sets up an odd contrast with the notions of falling that accompany his entrance, as this would appear to suggest the opposite of falling.

<sup>18</sup> This transformation can be seen across the conversations Steeply has with Marathe on the outcrop, which are numerous as they are scattered throughout the first half of the text.

shift in the focus of the gaze as the notion of 'woman' enters the scene. Conversely, narrative description is lacking around Marathe's dress, other than telling that he wears a 'windbreaker' with a 'sportshirt' underneath (the pocket of which is filled with 'many pens') (p. 90). Marathe's clothing is functional and consistent with what an agent may wear on duty. In contrast, Hugh Steeply's clothing marks his appearance as unusual, focusing the reader's attention. Additionally, Steeply is now read in a different manner, as gender 'traits' link with his outward appearance as a woman.

The mocking tone of the narrator's description, influenced by Marathe's point of view continues unabated, as the reader is told that 'Steeply's eyes were luridly made up. The rear of his dress was dirty' (p. 89). The pronoun use of 'his' clashes with items primarily serving to denote women (make up and a dress), and the sense of this new appearance makes him seem garish or unclean, and is disturbing from the perspective of gender. Steeply's attempt at imitating a woman at this point is a failure, and the accessories he chooses, or is provided with, do little to mask this: '[a] large odor of inexpensive and high-alcohol perfume came not from Steeply's person but from his handbag' (p. 90). It is clear that Steeply and his superiors recognize the cultural conventions that state that perfume and a handbag are paraphernalia of gendered performance (items a woman might carry). Yet placing such emphasis on items merely displaces gender from the body and onto external objects. Indeed, it seems that he does not yet know how to master such items in order to project himself as a woman, or to perform in ways that convince others that he is a woman. Steeply's unsuccessful attempt at conveying womanhood at this point is marred by the narrator's use of stereotypical language. This confirms the existence of a hierarchy of gender, for when we are told that Steeply 'had perspired also through his rouge, and his mascara had melted to become whorish', this highlights the simplistic ways in which women are often categorized through their outward appearance, linking back to Steeply's entrance where his make up and dress are described as lurid and dirty (p. 90).

Steeply's make up is not perfect, thus he is likened to a whore (suggestive of promiscuity and prostitution), in spite of the fact that we are fully aware that Steeply is not a woman at this stage of the novel but merely a poor

imitation of a woman. Steeply appears to put a great deal of effort into the authenticity of his appearance as he 'even removed and replaced his pumps in the upright-on-one-leg-bringing-other-foot-up-behind-his-bottom way of a feminine U.S.A. woman' (p. 90). We intuit from this that the action is the culturally accepted way for a woman to replace a high-heel shoe in public while wearing a dress, where the thighs stay together during the manoeuvre, thus limiting exposure of the genital area. However, the question of whose language this is is difficult to ascertain, because though it is written in third-person narration the addition of 'feminine U.S.A. woman' speaks once more of Marathe's point of view. This narrative device draws attention to matters of 'routine' gendered behaviour, and is in line with Butler's thoughts on gender.

Following this the narrator deals another blow to Steeply's manifestation as a woman, as Steeply appears 'huge and bloated as a woman, not merely unattractive but inducing something like sexual despair', but without specifying in whom this feeling is provoked (p. 90). Unlike Marathe, Steeply's outward appearance is open to critique, in terms of his attractiveness (or unattractiveness) to others. The expectation seems to be that because Steeply dresses as a woman this should immediately turn him into a potential object of desire, depending on the focalizer—which in this case is nullified by the apparent grotesquery of his appearance. If this were to remain the case throughout the novel we could dismiss it as stereotypical and hurtful—using comedic effect as a weapon to ridicule an unsuccessful portrayal of woman, by an ungainly man in woman's clothing. However, this will not remain the case, though the description of Steeply becomes far less flattering before this occurs:

He [Steeply] was a large and soft man, some type of brutal-U.S.-contact-sport athlete now become fat. He appeared to Marathe to look less like a woman than a twisted parody of womanhood. Electrolysis had caused patches of tiny red pimples along his jowls and upper lip. He also held his elbow out, the arm holding the match for lighting, which is how no woman lights a cigarette, who is used to breasts and keeps the lighting elbow in. Also Steeply teetered ungracefully on his pumps' heels on the stone's uneven surface. [...] Steeply's purse was small and glossy black, and the sunglasses he wore had womanly frames with small false jewels at the temples. Marathe believed that something in Steeply enjoyed his grotesque appearance and craved the humiliation of

the field-disguises his B.S.S. superiors requested of him (pp. 93-94).

The normative generic references of how a woman should present herself, which Steeply struggles with at this time, gift the reader an imagined framework of the notion of woman. The reader's attention is brought to focus on the act of becoming one's gender, as if a step-by-step process is all that is required (to be slim, not fat; to have smooth skin, not stubble; to act demure, not forward; to appear graceful, not ungainly). However, it is worth noting that his superiors first conceive of the idea of Steeply dressing as a woman, as part of his job as an intelligence agent in the Office of Unspecified Services (*Bureau des Services sans Specificite*, according to Quebecois French Marathe). Steeply is meant to be in disguise, as a field agent (which hints at combat), yet the ridiculousness and the apparent grotesquery of his appearance works against the intended outcome (of inconspicuousness), thus producing a comedic effect as it draws more attention. When Steeply is referred to as a perverted imitation of womanhood this suggests that his disguise *is* inappropriate for his mission, and as the military/combat context is displaced onto a social and cultural setting, specifically around notions of gender.

Butler's theory of the performativity of gender is useful, here, with respect to Steeply's coming transformation, because of the very nature of the use of gender—Steeply's superiors must consider gender as a suitable disguise, and eventually this is confirmed to be the case when Steeply is viewed as a woman by all who come into contact with him. The passages shown so far appear to indicate an unsuccessful masquerade as a woman. However, when the narrative moves to Enfield Tennis Academy Steeply enters successfully as Helen, and the change seems complete. Though the reader is not privy to all of the work undertaken in achieving the move from twisted parody to a convincing performance as a woman, there are hints during the final meeting between Marathe and Steeply on the outcrop of the coming transformation: 'M. Hugh Steeply of B.S.S. was standing then with his weight on one hip and looked his most female when he smoked, with his elbow in his arm and the hand to his mouth and the back of this hand to Marathe, a type of fussy ennui that reminded Marathe of women in hats and padded shoulders in black-and-white films,

smoking' (p. 430). Steeply's performance mirrors that of many of the female actors mentioned in Biskind's reading of 50's Hollywood, as if he has taken his cues from icons of a golden age of film, which in turn speaks of the power of the visualized image in enforcing conventional notions of gender, in this instance. Though lacking context at this stage, and without success (so far), Steeply's becoming a woman serves to underscore Butler's assertion that there is no 'inner gender core', no essential femininity or masculinity that is to be found, but rather that gender is, in part, the result of 'ideals that are never quite inhabited by anyone' (Butler, 'Melancholy', p. 14). In a similar manner to that of Orin, Steeply's performativity of gender appears to speak of something else, but where Butler's theory is often tied to sexuality, with respect to considerations of homosexual and heterosexual practice, respectively, Steeply's sexuality is rarely commented upon, save for the fact that we know that there is a Mrs Steeply (though the two are recently divorced), and therefore it is gender, not sexuality, that remains the focus herein.

Initially, it is difficult to define what Steeply's performance signifies other than as an example of comic relief, casting Steeply as a figure of fun. We know that he is meant to be in disguise, and that he acts on orders from a higher authority, and that dressing as a woman is imposed upon him in the first instance. In this respect, Steeply's performance cannot be likened to that of a drag act, or of performance in a theatrical sense, which tends to be telling in its 'imitation' of women in that it can be either celebratory or derisory of womanhood.<sup>19</sup> Steeply's performance lacks political motivation, and as such is not indicative of cross-dressing, which speaks of motive. Instead, to borrow from Butler once more, we may consider this as an 'appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality' (Butler, *GT*, p. 174). Steeply requires a disguise, and his superiors choose for him to dress as a woman. Butler's theory is useful in questioning what happens in the text, because there is a shift from a poor imitation of a woman (a twisted parody of

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), (p. 127),

womanhood) to a convincing imitation of a woman, where men start to act upon the sexual attraction they feel as Steeply morphs from Hugh to Helen.<sup>20</sup>

Critical to our understanding, here, is the notion of imitation, which Butler links to gender in that '[t]he notion of gender parody [...] does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original' (Butler, *GT*, p. 175 emphasis original). Again, were Steeply's character to offer only comedic effect, in turn being derisory to womanhood, there would be little point stressing its significance to the text.<sup>21</sup> The fact that Steeply's role in the text is prolonged and complex, through the transformation from twisted parody (as initially described) to object of desire (as will soon be shown in a discussion of Orin's desire for Helen Steeply), states the need to engage with this element of gender performativity. Steeply's metamorphosis provides an opportunity to engage with Butler's assertion that 'gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without origin. [...] [I]t is a production which, [...] postures as an imitation' (Butler, *GT*, p. 175-6). Steeply's gender performance is merely an imitation with no foundation, and as such, his attempt at performing gender is as artificial as any other (yet as valid as any other attempt) as he continues his fall across gender. Marathe confirms this view, as he gazes upon Steeply's 'broad and soft' back and says, 'you [Steeply] stand on nothing. Nothing of ground or rock beneath your feet. You fall; you blow here and there. How does one say: tragically, unvoluntarily, lost' (p. 108). Marathe hints that there is no core or essence to Steeply's being, yet it is only because of Steeply's attempt at cross-gender identification that this becomes apparent, and therefore open to discourse.

Marathe's point of view informs the reader that it is Steeply's ugly feet that betray his [Steeply's] attempts at a faultless performance as a woman (p. 419). However, note that the supposedly prettiest girl in *Broom* (Mindy Metalman) has pretty ugly feet. Speaking once more of something hidden in Steeply's use of disguise is Marathe's opinion that:

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<sup>20</sup> Again, this happens when Hugh transforms into Helen at Enfield Tennis Academy. Of particular interest is the sexual attraction that serial womanizer Orin Incandenza exhibits towards Helen (discussed later in the chapter).

<sup>21</sup> And just a brief note on Steeply's surname remaining unchanged during the assignment, as if the move from Hugh to Helen is sufficient for the disguise to be effective.

Marathe knew also that something within the real M. Hugh Steeply did need the humiliations of his absurd field-personae, that the more grotesque or unconvincing he seemed likely to be as a disguised persona the more nourished and actualized his deep parts felt in the course of preparation for the humiliating attempt to portray; he (Steeply) used the mortification he felt as a huge woman or pale Negro or palsied twit of a degenerative musician as fuel for the assignments' performance; Steeply welcomed the subsumption of his dignity and self in the very role that offended his dignity of self (p. 420).

Nichols misreads the above passage, and concludes that such feelings of humiliation, and of Steeply being nourished and actualized in appearing grotesque and unconvincing (as a woman), indicates Steeply's own thoughts on the matter (Nichols, 'Carnival', p. 10). Whereas, in fact, as I have stated it is Marathe who passes such judgment on Steeply. Nichols seems willing to ignore the fact that Steeply and Marathe are adversaries, operating on different sides in the world of espionage, and so to attribute such feelings to Steeply is to do a disservice in this particular instance. Indeed, there is a sense that Steeply's other masquerades speak of more than just his job as a field agent, that there is a melancholia that only becomes apparent through such transformations. Here, Steeply functions as a cue to acts of performance generally. With respect to his disguise as a woman, the imitative nature of gender is highlighted once more as Marathe imagines 'thin men with horn-rim spectacles [...] carefully packing with clutter the purse of a field-operative to create the female effect' (p. 429). Gender is packaged, constructed, and approved, under laboratory-like conditions, before deployment in the field—and chimes with a common misreading of Butler's theory of performativity, where items of dress and accessories alone are thought sufficient for the task at hand, which Butler argues is definitely not the case.

In an article on trans-exclusionary radical feminists, Katherine O'Donnell discusses critics' misunderstanding of Butler's work on gender, and the feminist gender theory that follows Butler, as arising from notions 'that we can (or must) choose and change the expression of our gendered embodiment *easily and at*



*will*'.<sup>22</sup> Steeply's attire in itself is not the issue, for it is the dramatic shift that occurs in the text (discussed shortly) that demonstrates the complexity of issues around gender. Indeed, it will be shown that *Infinite Jest*, through its depiction of Hugh/Helen Steeply, makes space to consider 'how embodiment entails human engagement in forming ourselves within the pre-existing constructs of vocabularies and practices that we find ourselves inhabiting' (O'Donnell, 'Trans-Exclusionary', p. 85). In Hugh/Helen's example the limits of current vocabularies are exposed as Hugh becomes Helen, as others no longer see Hugh Steeply as Hugh, and as Helen, and the feminine pronouns that accompany her arrival in the text, replace what went before via the forming of new practices. The issue that Nichols appears to have with Hugh/Helen Steeply, expressed through only a handful of sentences following her misreading of the text, appears as a form of dissatisfaction with what she finds in the text: 'Steeply's discomfort with self-exposure is displaced by donning heterodox costumes that further the surveillance, information gathering, and violence that serves as instruments of social control rather than subversion' (Nichols, 'Carnival', p. 10). To reiterate, Steeply does not express feelings of discomfort (in fact, quite the opposite) because the words that Nichols attributes to Steeply are actually Marathe's. Furthermore, Nichols' use of heterodox suggests that she has a problem with what she is reading, with respect to Hugh/Helen Steeply's transformation. Lisa M. Diamond and Molly Butterworth discuss this issue by explaining that 'the normative and healthy endpoint of transgender development is often thought to be the adoption of a stable, integrated, unambiguous identification as 100% male or 100% female, often achieved via some form of physical transformation (for example some combination of clothes, makeup, demeanour, hormones, or surgery) aimed at bringing one's psychological gender and one's physical gender presentation into direct alignment'.<sup>23</sup> It is fair to say that Hugh/Helen's transformation is full of ambiguity, and that is why it is so important to explore the text in relation to issues of gender. As Helen dominates the text and Hugh recedes the reader

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<sup>22</sup> Katherine O'Donnell, 'The Theological Basis for Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist Positions', in Banerjee, N., Browne, K., Ferreira, E., Olasik, M. and Podmore, J. (Eds.). *Lesbian Feminism Essays Opposing the Global Heteropatriarchy* (Zed Books: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 85 (emphasis original).

<sup>23</sup> Lisa M. Diamond and Molly Butterworth, 'Questioning Gender and Sexual Identity: Dynamic Links Over Time', *Sex Roles*, 59 (2008), 365, (p. 366).

remains aware that Helen was Hugh, and unlike the characters who interact with Helen (knowing her only ever this way), the reader is forced to process this information.

This is made all the more challenging when considering '[o]ur culture's difficulty in making sense of individuals with multiple identities, multiple subjectivities, and multiple social locations is manifested in the lack of language to describe such experiences' (Diamond and Butterworth, 'Questioning', p. 373). Hugh/Helen's inclusion in the text certainly makes space for some thought on the limits of existing pronouns, for example, and perhaps he/she does not fully articulate the complexity at work in Hugh/Helen's transformation. And aside from language use, O'Donnell provides some helpful thoughts on why there is a need for feminists in particular to avoid falling into the trap of demanding 'fixed marker[s]' of identity: '[w]hen we argue for the necessity of natural characteristics to establish and secure social identities we operate a *cordon sanitaire* exclusion policy and we run the risk that the policing of this boundary becomes the focus for our politics' (O'Donnell, 'Trans-exclusionary', p. 87, emphasis original). Wallace's text, with its inclusion of Hugh/Helen Steeply, provides an example that Nichols seems to want to police without giving full consideration to the implications of what Hugh/Helen represents. Indeed, Marathe and Steeply's conversations on the outcropping in Arizona are varied in content and are mystifying at times. When reduced to their essence they speak of systems of control ('freedom from' - via Steeply's U.S. government) versus a more anarchic sense of existence ('freedom to' - via Marathe's Canadian government), and this mirrors Steeply's becoming a woman. Gender is presented in such a way that it does not appear to be stable, which is not how we are taught gender operates in conventional society, and thus the stability of gender falters, as Butler predicts. If gender is less stable than society tells us it is, then we can choose to explore new iterations of gender, and in this respect it is imperative to discuss Steeply's transformation in the text, as Hugh morphs convincingly into Helen.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Literally the first person that Steeply meets at E.T.A., Aubrey deLint, seems transfixed by her, and sexually so.

### 5.3 Cross-gender Elements

The narrator's use of language during Helen Steeply's infiltration of E.T.A. supports the notion that Steeply is readable as a woman to all who meet or see her. Though the narrative voice complicates this occasionally, it is the language in this section of the novel that supports the assertion that gender lacks origin and that it is indeed imitative and performative. An element of mockery is exhibited via Marathe's point of view when Helen is introduced as possessing 'a certain thuggish allure but hardly the pericardium-piercer that Orin had made her sound like, to Hal' (p. 652). Although Helen is made to sound somewhat ridiculous, here, note the pronoun change from masculine to feminine (continuing for much of the narration hereafter). A sense of ridicule accompanies Steeply's physical appearance as 'it was the first high-caliber junior tennis she'd ever seen, she said, the massive journalist' (p. 652). As a woman, Steeply faces continuing critique based upon her outward appearance, although it is unusual for a journalist to gain access to the grounds, let alone the players, and therefore Helen's presence at E.T.A. is treated with suspicion and much scrutiny: 'orders that [Aubrey] deLint keep the mammoth soft-profiler [Helen] in direct sight at all times were explicit and emphatic'<sup>25</sup> (p. 652). Aubrey deLint accompanies Helen at all times while she is on the grounds of E.T.A., as she prepares to interview Hal about his older brother, Orin. The narrator explains the E.T.A. headmaster's reluctance around Helen interviewing Hal:

Charles Tavis won't let [Helen] see Hal yet, even chaperoned, Tavis's reasons for the reticence too detailed for Helen Steeply to understand, probably, but she was watching from the Show-bleachers' top row, poised over a notebook, wearing a fuchsia ski cap with a rooster-comb top instead of a pom-pom top, blowing into her fist, her weight making the bleacher below her bow and inclining deLint oddly toward her. [...] deLint hadn't stopped talking into the big lady's ear (p. 654).

Helen's size contrasts with stereotypical notions of womanliness and the feminine, yet this does not deter deLint from viewing her as a woman. In fact,

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<sup>25</sup> Helen is referred to as the soft-profiler because *Moment* magazine is not known for its hard-interviewing style. One would equate it to *Hello* or *OK*, which emphasizes its focus on visual image. She has recently finished interviewing Orin J. Incandenza under the guise of an interest in his talent as kicker for the New Orleans Saints football team.

her size and weight allows for a moment of intimacy as the bleachers bend sufficiently, moving deLint closer to her so that he is able to talk directly into Helen's ear.

There are minor disruptive elements following Steeply's transformation, and as Helen's point of view starts to influence the text the narrator shares that 'Steeply had played tennis only a couple of times, with his wife, and had felt ungainly and simian out there' (p. 658). Since Steeply's introduction as Helen the narrative contains only feminine pronouns, and just prior to this gender pronoun slip, deLint refers habitually to Helen as 'babe' (p. 657). The change in gender pronoun from feminine back to masculine occurs only twice during the passage, where Helen considers moments from Hugh's past. The tension that this creates is indicative of the 'attachment' and 'disavowal' that Butler speaks of in connection to a "man" performing femininity'. Where Butler insists that this is motivated by feelings to do with sexuality, Wallace's text offers little in this area. In a similar vein to the discussion around Orin's melancholia, Steeply's femininity indicates an attempt at escaping the confines of gender (Butler, 'Melancholy', pp. 15-6).

To consider this further, as deLint moves away from Helen to talk with one of the tennis players, female prorector Thierry Poutrincourt ensures that Helen is kept under constant surveillance, as instructed. Poutrincourt is 'freshly showered' and wears a 'violetish ski cap just enough of a shade away from the journalist's hat to make the people behind them pretend to shield their eyes from the clash', and so is also open to ridicule (p. 673). Poutrincourt comments on Helen's body image, telling Helen that 'my family's loved ones also are of large size [...] it is difficult to be large' (p. 674). The narrator informs the reader that it was 'Steeply's pre-assignment decision [...] to let all size-references pass as if there was some ability to screen out any reference to size or girth, originating possibly in adolescence' (p. 674). Steeply is not simply living in the moment as Helen, but has crafted an imagined teenage-self with which to explain away issues of size.

Following this, as Helen adjusts her 'long peasant skirt' and crosses her legs, she gazes upon Poutrincourt and muses that she 'looked more male than anything, long and hard and breastless', which offers an opportunity to consider

the limits of binary notions of gender, while placing stress upon notions of spectatorship once more (p. 675). Helen, in her successful fall across gender, casts judgment upon another woman, insinuating that she does not look female in her outward appearance. Hugh's transformation into Helen, where deLint refers to her as 'babe', and Poutrincourt offers sympathy at Helen being an oversized woman, confirms J. Jack Halberstam's 'cardinal rule of gender: [that] one must be readable at a glance'.<sup>26</sup> Helen is now readable as a woman at the tennis academy.

A further sense of ambiguity around gender continues as Poutrincourt and Helen converse at courtside. Poutrincourt begins a discussion of Jim Incandenza's philosophical musings whilst 'looking at Steeply almost too carelessly, it almost seemed', which adds nuance upon nuance, before the conversation turns to the idiosyncratic nature of seeing: '[t]he studying [of Jim's] was not so much how one sees a thing, but this relation between oneself and what one sees. He translated this numerously across different fields' (p. 682). Poutrincourt notices something in Steeply that reminds her of herself, yet the focalizer of the scene is an anonymous, sceptical viewer of events—focusing upon details a reader might ordinarily miss. For example, while on the outcropping with Marathe, Steeply is shown to 'cock his head in a way that was both feminine and birdlike' (p. 491). When Poutrincourt first joins Helen on the bleachers her smile is described as 'rictal', and soon after she is 'smiling rictally across Steeply at deLint' (rictal also features in *BI* with the description of the Mulatto) (pp. 674, 679).<sup>27</sup> It is the birdlike mannerisms that Poutrincourt recognizes both in herself, and in Helen, leading to her viewing Helen as a woman. Yet these traits are not confined to a specific gender, nor even the human species, and so fluidity is presented as an inherent aspect of gender. Poutrincourt (a born-female woman) appears male to Steeply, while Steeply (a born-male woman) looks like a woman in Poutrincourt's eyes.

Concurrent to the Poutrincourt/Steeply conversation, deLint talks to himself while thinking aloud about young tennis players at E.T.A. and their

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<sup>26</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), (p.23),

<sup>27</sup> See Brief Interviews chapter.

qualities. His thoughts turn to traits he views as being connected to a person's sex:

This emotional susceptibility in terms of forgetting being more commonly a female thing. [Gerhard] Schtitt and I think it's a will issue. Susceptible wills are more common to the top girls here. We see it in Longley, Millie Kent and Frannie Unwin [...] but the one we see this most in is Hal (p. 682).

Aubrey deLint's comments follow Poutrincourt telling Helen that to 'survive here for later is, finally, to have it both ways', meaning the mental toughness of a John Wayne character, while possessing the emotional qualities deLint attributes to Hal (p. 682). Hal's positioning alongside the E.T.A. girls occurs because deLint believes that Hal is emotionally 'susceptible', thus applying a stereotyped notion of a gender trait in a non-typical way—deLint's suggestion followed to its logical conclusion sees Hal as a girl. Poutrincourt breaks off her conversation with Helen and cocks her head (birdlike) to disagree: 'this does not sound like Hal Incandenza' (p. 682).<sup>28</sup> What deLint views as weakness (susceptible wills/emotion) Poutrincourt regards as strength (having it both ways), and therefore she does not recognize emotional susceptibility as a weakness in Hal but rather that he displays a more rounded sense of self—a view further complicated by the fact that the novel starts and ends with Hal's drug-induced mental breakdown.

Equally perplexing is the midterm paper given to the E.T.A. students by Mary Esther Thode. M. E. Thode's 'methods' appear questionable as the narrator mentions Thode's most recent 'psycho-political offering, "The Toothless Predator: Breast-Feeding as Sexual Assault" (p. 307). The latest paper the students receive is titled, "The Personal Is the Political Is the Psychopathological: The Politics of Contemporary Psychopathological Double-Binds' (p. 307). It cites an example of a 'pathologically agoraphobic" and 'pathologically kleptomaniacal' individual and asks how does the individual leave home to steal when the individual cannot bear to leave home to steal (p. 307). Prior to this appears the following instruction in bold capitals: 'KEEP YOUR ANSWERS BRIEF AND GENDER NEUTRAL' (p. 307, emphasis original).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Again, the birdlike references indicating notions of cross-species.

<sup>29</sup> Itself a direct reference to reader response.

The ambiguity of the instruction, with its emphasis on briefness and gender neutrality (perhaps a nod to the rise of political correctness around this period), mirrors the arbitrariness of the gender constructs in sections of the novel. Uncertainty accompanies those elements of gender that we are taught to believe are fixed and constant. As such, the performativity of gender in this aspect of *Infinite Jest* undermines conventional notions of gender, as part of a person's 'essence', and instead offers up the potential that Butler sees: that gender is imitative of an imagined core with no origin. Another example of this is the *Bureau des Services sans Specificite's*<sup>30</sup> proclivity for assigning fictional personae to its field-operatives:

Casting men as women, women as longshoremen or Orthodox rabbinicals, heterosexual men as homosexual men, Caucasians as Negroes or caricaturesque Haitians or Dominicans, healthy males as degenerative-nerve-disease-sufferers, healthy women operatives as hydrocephalic boys or epileptic public-relations executives, nondeformed U.S.O.U.S. personnel made not only to pretend but sometimes to actually suffer deformity, all for the realism of their field-personae (p. 419).

Comedic effect suggests examples of 'official', authoritative, yet theatrical casting of a person's attributes, along with a willingness (and an ability) to disrupt notions not only of gender, but also of occupation, religion, sexual orientation, race, bodily health, and age. In relation to this example from the text, Nichols concludes that '[i]n the traditional carnival setting, these "costumes" would have suggested transgression, but that implication is undermined by the fact that such disguises are used to cloak a conservative group of government agents' (Nichols, 'Carnival', p. 9). Nichols is unwilling to see such acts as subversive, precisely because of the alleged authority that such agents possess. However, what Nichols fails to grasp is that the above examples are extravagant displays that do not easily fit with notions of espionage and secrecy—it is almost as if the *Bureau des Services sans Specificite* wants to be seen, which completely contradicts notions of successful spying. Furthermore, the novel continues to treat issues of gender identity with ambiguity in a number of ways, as already shown, and a further moment is seen when 'a

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<sup>30</sup> The *Bureau des Services sans Specificite*, or U.S. Office of Unspecified Services, is whom Hugh/Helen Steeply works for as a field intelligence operative.

female girl [...] clicks past' Mario Incandenza (p. 591). Adding 'female' to 'girl' is unnecessary unless considering that to do so holds sex and gender at a distance from one another, once more ratifying Butler's assertion that sex is not the site of gender.<sup>31</sup> As a result, gender is seen not as an essential core belonging to a person, but rather a set of codes that are performative. Gender is unspecified, which links with Steeply's employers.

Following the initial aspects of Hugh's transformation to Helen, there is the effect that Helen has upon Orin following their initial meeting. This is a crucial aspect that demonstrates the extent to which Wallace's text disrupts conventional notions of gender through subtle, unexpected shifts in the use of language. The most effective of these is the change in gender pronoun, where the switch from Hugh/he/him seems to be unproblematic for the narrator, which also signals that this should be the same for the reader because when the change occurs it is not to mock Hugh's appearance but rather to confirm Helen as 'she'. However, the change happens as the result of the mastery of repetitive codes of gender presentation that conform to societal expectations. In this respect, Hugh's efforts at presenting gender 'correctly' are bound up in the performativity of what we are led to believe are feminine traits: holding and lighting cigarettes a certain way; adjusting high-heel shoes; the need to administer electrolysis for unwanted facial hair; and other seemingly arbitrary acts that indicate the flimsy ground upon which gender is built. In this respect, Hugh's metamorphosis as Helen corresponds to what Butler describes as 'cross-gendered identification', but where Butler views such attempts as 'the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexualized genders form themselves through the renunciation of the possibility of homosexuality', there is a lack of emphasis on sexuality in Hugh/Helen's example (Butler, 'Melancholy', pp. 15-16). Therefore, speaking of something else—perhaps a sense of 'disavowed attachments' rather than 'the sexually unperformable [or of...] those whom it would be impossible to love', as Butler suggests (Butler, 'Melancholy', pp. 15-16).

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<sup>31</sup> As for language use in this particular instance, 'female' may act as an adjective to the noun of 'girl', or it may signal a doubling of nouns, which seems superfluous.



Though elements of sexual attraction are present during the Orin/Helen sections the attraction is all Orin's: Helen does not reciprocate. As Helen 'interviews' Orin for *Moment* magazine, which is presented in a style expanded upon in *Brief Interviews* (see *BI* chapter), and while approaching the end of Orin's response to Helen's first question (Q.), Orin flirts with Helen. Orin views Helen as a woman, though like no other woman he has ever met before: 'Are those earrings real copper? [...] Most extremely beautiful women I've ever met complain of getting a sort of itchy green crust when they wear real copper' (p. 1027, fn. 145). The implication is that Helen is extremely beautiful, and superior to the other beautiful women Orin has met—which clashes with Marathe's initial appraisal of Steeply's appearance on the outcropping in Arizona. Soon after, Orin suggests that he will take Helen shopping for some copper jewellery, which seems a conventionally stereotyped (read sexist) way a man might behave towards a woman he finds attractive (p. 1027, fn. 145).

Following a few more questions, Orin starts behaving in his customary way—affecting openness and honesty in an attempt at instigating a sexual encounter. With knowledge of Orin's 'techniques' of seduction, we can deduce that this may be an example where Orin merely feigns sincerity:

I'm worried this might sound sexist or offensive. I've been around very, very beautiful women before, but I'm not accustomed to them being really acute and sharp and politically savvy and penetrating and intimidatingly intelligent. I'm sorry if that sounds sexist. It's simply been my experience. I'll go ahead and simply tell you the truth and take the chance that you might think I'm some kind of stereotypical Neanderthal athlete or sexist clown (p. 1028, fn. 145).

Orin's use of language is self-involved, theatrical, even pathological, and suggestive of the failed relation he has with his mother. Orin's childhood friend, Marlon Bain, sums up this approach as '*sincerity with a motive*', where Orin's strategy of 'the whole openness-demeanor thing is *itself* a purposive social falsehood; it is a pose of poselessness; Orin Incandenza is the *least open man* I know' (p. 1048, fn. 269, emphasis original). Orin's technique is consistent with his attempts at seducing other beautiful women, and so we can assume that Helen is a beautiful woman. There are parallels with the later collection of stories in *Brief Interviews*, and so Orin may be an honorary member of the

*Hideous Men* club—the kind of man that the *BI* stories portray in a far from flattering manner. If Orin's approach is creepy because of its disingenuousness, then stranger still is the fact that Helen, with her combination as a beautiful and politically savvy woman, is almost a replica of his own mother, Avril Incandenza—the woman he claims to despise. The number of alternate readings that this produces makes Orin's attraction towards Helen of vital importance to a reading of gender.<sup>32</sup>

As previously noted there is the Oedipal link to consider, where Orin may act upon the desire he feels towards his mother—a desire forbidden and thus projected onto other suitable women (confirming the heterosexual imperatives that Butler associates with Freud's theory). There is also a hint that Orin's obsession with Helen (as a substitute for his own mother) is based upon issues of sexual abuse that come to the fore when John Wayne and Avril perform their jock/cheerleader routine. Molly Notkin repeats this view later in the novel, although she is being interrogated at the time and so her conclusion that Avril sexually abused Orin as a child are not reliable (p. 791). Complicating matters further is Marlon Bain's testimony that Orin's efforts to present himself to women as the ultimate-caring-lover is mirrored in Avril's efforts to present herself to her children as the ultimate care-giving mother. Bain discusses Orin's party trick at E.T.A.—an impression of his mother assuming 'an enormous warm and loving smile [moving...] steadily toward you until he is in so close that his face is spread up flat against your own face and your breaths mingle' (pp. 1051-52, fn.269). The mingling of breath links with Orin's earlier encounter and what he believes is a near-perfect sexual union (with Luria, the Swiss hand-model 'Subject'). Bain continues (during their epistolary exchange Bain frequently gets Helen's name wrong), 'if it seems to you that he does, truly, derive his own best pleasure from giving you pleasure, you might wish to reflect soberly on this vision of Orin imitating his dear Moms as philanthropist: a person closing in, arms open wide, smiling' (p. 1052, fn.269). Orin behaves as Avril does towards others, though with different end results in mind, and so we can view Orin as Avril. Given that Avril is also hyper-sexualized to the extent

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<sup>32</sup> And remember that it was the Hellenic, not the Evian version of woman that Wallace found most useful and fascinating in his essay, 'The Empty Plenum'.

that she engages 'in sexual enmeshments with just about everything with a Y-chromosome', we can view Avril as Orin: as if the two gendered subjects are interchangeable (p. 791).

As stated earlier, with respect to Orin's obsession with and attraction towards Helen, there is the possibility that Orin's melancholia is a form of what Butler theorizes as 'melancholy gender', where there is the possibility that Orin acts upon repressed homosexual desires. However, this is complicated by the fact that Helen's demeanour is that of a woman (as opposed to Marathe's view of Steeply earlier in the text). This gives rise to a modification of Butler's theory in that the melancholia that Orin exhibits is not necessarily from repressed homosexual longings, but from an actual desire to appropriate the female form. The contempt that Orin feels for his 'subjects' combined with the need to pleasure them sexually, rather than merely satisfy himself in the way that most hypermasculine males might, along with the fact that such behaviour seems to be obsessive and repetitive, indicates that for Orin there is a threshold which he is unable to penetrate, and this behaviour recurs time and again. It is precisely because of the detail the text provides around one of Orin's sexual encounters that he thus becomes a subject, open to speculative enquiry and critical comment alike.

To return once more to the moment where Orin feels like he has entered into a perfect sexual union with Luria, the 'Swiss hand-model' he encounters at an airport, it is vital to remark upon the events immediately before this in order to fully explicate what happens during the 'obliterating trinity of You and I into We' (p. 557). There is also the 'subject' in question, Luria P., a Quebecois operative known for being 'allegedly irresistible' and an associate of Orin's mother, Avril (p. 30).<sup>33</sup> Luria poses as a subject to engage Orin in sexual activity in order to gain knowledge of the whereabouts of the film cartridge master-copy—ironically, then, Orin is the 'subject', not Luria, and this is borne out later in the novel when Luria tortures Orin by imprisoning him in a giant glass tumbler, pouring cockroaches in in order to terrify him:

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<sup>33</sup> Note that both Luria and Avril hail from L'Islet County, Quebec, and that their names are almost perfect anagrams of one another—and also that during the entire time that Helen is on the grounds at E.T.A., Avril's whereabouts are unknown, which is most suspicious because she is said to rarely leave the grounds (p. 655). There are suggestions in the Wallace community that Avril may well be Luria, but on close inspection of the facts this hypothesis cannot be corroborated.

Mlle. Luria P\_\_\_\_\_, who disdained the subtler aspects of technical interviews and had lobbied simply to be given a pair of rubber gloves and two or three minutes alone with the Subject's [Orin's] testicles [...] had predicted accurately what the Subject's response would be when [...] sewer roaches began pouring blackly and shinily through, and as the Subject splayed itself against the tumbler's glass and pressed its face so flat against the absurd glass's side [...], and much muffled, shrieked at them 'Do it to her! *Do it to her!*' (p. 972, emphasis original).

Orin is dehumanized, and turned into a generic specimen for observation. Given permission, Luria would perform an act of violence upon Orin's testicles to render him compliant, castrated even. Perhaps the greatest bodily symbol of a hypermasculine identity that places emphasis on displays of virility is the testicles. Such violence is not necessary because Orin, as 'subject', is trapped inside an upturned glass like an insect or spider, stripped of gender, even humanity, and the narrative voice influenced by Luria's point of view refers to Orin by the gender-neutral pronouns, 'itself' and 'its'. The shift in gendered pronouns in Hugh/Helen's transformation from 'he' to 'she', and in Orin's move from 'he' to 'it' marks another moment in the text where certainty of gender is disrupted, and even made redundant through language use.

Arguably, Orin occupies the position of hypermasculine-sex-addict while also operating as gender melancholic, both of which culminate in feelings of attraction towards Helen Steeply; in fact, the sexual coupling of Orin and Luria follows immediately after Orin drops Helen at the airport so that she can fly to E.T.A. for further interviews with Orin's family. Helen arouses Orin but keeps him at a distance—Orin's sexual desire is not reciprocated. Luria's appearance is well timed in this respect, and since Orin is ripe for the picking it is Orin, not Luria, who is the subject *qua* object to be devoured, metaphorically. This is one of the many sexual acts that the reader is told Orin engages in with young mothers (though few are described in any detail, and all are referred to as Subjects), and is part of Orin's strategy to keep himself from the 'endless fall'.

In the initial introduction of Orin's character, where his melancholia is noted, the process of 'going to sleep again at the end of it [the day] will be like falling, again, off something tall and sheer' (p. 46). Steeply's inclusion literalizes this notion of falling, through her name, hinting at the steepness of the fall, and

through the theoretical and literal fall across gender that she performs in the move from Hugh to Helen, but also in the feelings that are aroused in Orin, a hypermasculine sex-addict known for countless sexual liaisons with young, beautiful mothers prior to this seemingly odd departure where Orin exhibits seemingly genuine attraction towards Helen (she is neither young, nor a mother). Other men follow Orin's example in this respect—Orin's teammates on the Arizona Cardinals football team also find Helen sexually attractive. This as an oddity when considering the way in which major league sports, U.S. or otherwise, promote notions of heterosexuality as the dominant mode, with examples to the contrary rare to find.

When considering Orin's position as punter for the Cardinals, Delfino points to Alan Dundes' essay which discusses 'the psychological implications of the underlying symbolism of American Football as 'a male preserve that manifests both the physical and cultural values of masculinity'.<sup>34</sup> Delfino notes what he sees as 'homoerotic undertone[s]' lurking within American Football in particular, and states that Dundes' essay 'persuasively analyzes how football is an acceptable, symbolic form of homosexuality' (Delfino, p. 24, fn.6). However, Delfino fails to mention the part of Wallace's text that appears to reference Dundes' text obliquely. Buried amongst the footnotes, amid the epistolary back and forth between Helen Steepley and Marlon Bain, Bain speaks of Orin's defection from tennis to football, describing the latter sport as:

A grunting, crunching ballet of repressed homoeroticism, football, Ms. Steepley [sic.], on my view. The exaggerated breadth of the shoulders, the masked eradication of facial personality, the emphasis on contact-vs.-avoidance-of-contact. The gains in terms of penetration and resistance. The tight pants that accentuate the gluteals and hamstrings and what look for all the world like codpieces. [...] Don't the pants' fronts look fitted with codpieces? And have a look at these men whacking each other's asses after a play. [...] Football is pure homophobically repressed nancy-ism, and do not let O. tell you different (p. 1047, fn.269).

There are striking parallels between Dundes' text and Bain's appraisal of American Football, where both problematize conventional notions of masculinity by focusing on the peculiarities of the sport with respect to dress

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<sup>34</sup> Alan Dundes, 'Into the Endzone for a Touchdown: A Psychoanalytic Consideration of American Football', *Western Folklore*, 37 (1978), 75-88, (p.77), in JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1499315>>

codes, accepted behaviours, and language and terminology use in football. Dundes' text concludes: 'in its essence American football is an adolescent masculinity initiation ritual in which the winner gets into the loser's endzone more times than the loser gets into his' (Dundes, p. 88). The implication is that the very basis for the ritual of masculinity is based in repressed homosexual longing, as Butler posits, and is due to the overwhelming influence of Oedipal thought in Western society.

Bain's view is less subtle than Dundes', with its problematic use of hate-speech, where 'nancy-ism' describes the kind of man likely to act upon homosexual urges: effeminate. In this respect, both position gender (masculinity) amongst issues of sexuality: homosexuality in this particular instance. Yet homosexuality is unlikely to be the issue with Orin, or his teammates for that matter. Orin finds Helen attractive because she is a woman, and so do the other Cardinals' members. In a conversation with his brother, Hal, Orin says of Helen that she is:

Not all that tough or hard, but physically imposing. Large but not unerotic. A girl and a half in all directions. [...] She's more imposing than like most of our starting backfield. But weirdly sexy. The linemen are gaga. The tackles keep making all these cracks about does she maybe want to see their hard profile (pp. 246-47).

Orin suggests that a significant number of the football team feel a sexual attraction towards Helen. Again, this may indicate a comic predictability in Wallace's writing style, if the aim is to poke fun at Helen and those who find her attractive. However, at face value there is nothing even remotely homosexual in the football team's fascination with Helen if she is only ever viewed as a woman. In this sense, the football team acts in a typically heterosexual way towards Helen, though the behaviour is lewd and sexist. As such, and given that descriptions of sexual activity throughout the book are sparse, it is difficult to argue that sexuality is the focus. Rather, as is already evidenced, the emphasis remains on issues of gender.

Returning once more to the modification of Butler's theory of melancholy gender that this thesis adopts, it is the expression of wishing to appropriate an other gender that is key—a longing to be that which it is said

one cannot (borne of rules imposed by society and exhibited in Freud's Oedipal theory). Another moment that goes some way to confirm this stems from Millicent Kent's back-story. Kent is referred to as 'the U.S.S. Millicent Kent' because of her size: 'two hundred kilos if she was a kilo. Southpaw, one-hander off the backside, a serve Donnie Stott likes to clock with radar, and chart' (p. 121). As with Hugh/Helen, and also Don Gately, Millicent is an extraordinarily large person. As Millicent leads Mario Incandenza, Orin's younger brother, into a thicket to molest him sexually, details emerge of her reasons for leaving the family home at a young age to join the tennis academy.

Millicent explains to Mario that 'her real love and passion was modern interpretive dance' and that she loved returning home after school to put on her leotard and dance in her room (pp. 123-24). However, upon returning home one day she finds her father 'wearing her leotard. Which needless to say didn't fit very well. And with the small front portion of his huge bare feet squeezed into a pair of strapless pumps' (p. 124). Millicent describes the scene, as her father is caught by surprise 'in a grotesquely tiny and bulging violet leotard, capering. [...] The crotch of her leotard looked like a slingshot, it was so deformed' (p. 124). As with Hugh's entrance into the text the narrator offers caricature, played for comedic effect, and the third-person narrative voice (influenced by Millicent) continues with a scathing attack of her father's appearance:

Obscene mottled hirsute flesh had pooched and spilled out over every centimeter of the leotard's perimeter, she recalled. She'd had a voluptuous figure even at eight, she told Mario, but the Old Man was in a whole different-sized ballpark altogether. [...] His flesh jiggled and bounced as he capered. It was repellent, she said (p. 124).

The narrator confirms that this is an ongoing issue with Millicent's father and that in the past he wears her 'sisters' one-pieces and figure-skating skirts', and other petite girls' wear items (p. 124). Millicent clarifies the situation by admitting that 'her Old Man wasn't just a cross-dressing transvestite, she said; it turned out they always had to be a *relative's* female clothes' (p. 124, emphasis original). This is an example of failed parenting, which is quite common not only throughout *Infinite Jest*, but also Wallace's wider *corpus*. However, there is no

suggestion that Millicent's father's actions are sexually motivated—no abuse, or hint of inappropriate sexual behaviour is mentioned. Millicent describes events that suggest her father is attempting to appropriate a position not available to him as a man (that of a girl), and that this brings him joy (evidenced in the capering). That he attempts to do so in privacy, squeezing himself into articles of dress that are far too small for him because they are children's wear implies a desire for a return to childhood, the site where gender dictates how boys and girls behave and dress.

Though issues of molestation are not present with respect to her father's actions, Millicent's motivation for leading Mario into the thicket takes a worrying turn when one considers Mario as an innocent, sheltered from the harsh realities of life by his over-protective family. This innocence, vulnerability even, is seen as Millicent leads Mario towards the thicket 'as she took Mario's claw and said here to walk this way [...], the girl supporting him with one hand and beating an easement through the brush with the other' (p. 122). Nicknamed the U.S.S. Millicent Kent, she is likened to a U.S. Navy warship (to be feared) operating with impunity as Mario is directed to a quiet spot amongst the undergrowth, in much the same way David Mura might imagine sexual predators lead children away.<sup>35</sup> In a similar manner to that of '#BI 46' from *Brief Interviews*, the text goes on to present a non-stereotypical dynamic of sexual abuse upon which to focus, via a non-standard gendered paradigm of a female perpetrator and a male victim of sexual molestation.<sup>36</sup>

#### 5.4 Infinite Jest's Women

Avril Incandenza and Joelle van Dyne are the two most prominent women in *Infinite Jest* and are both dynamic characters. Joelle's story links with an act of child abuse recounted at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. A speaker describes running away from her adopted home, where her severely handicapped, adopted sister (known only as It) is raped by her biological father. Following one such incident the narrative voice describes It's facial expression:

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<sup>35</sup> Refer back to Chapter Three. David Mura, *A Male Grief: Notes on Pornography and Addiction: An Essay* (Milkweed Editions, 1985).

<sup>36</sup> See *Brief Interviews* chapter for more on this.



[T]he exact same expression as the facial expression on the stone-robed lady's face in this one untitled photo of some Catholic statue that hung [...] in the dysfunctional household's parlor right above the little teak table where the dysfunctional foster mother kept her beads and Hours and lay breviary, this photo of a statue of a woman whose stone robes were half hiked up and wrinkled in the most godawfully sensually prurient way, the woman reclined against uncut rock, her robes hiked and one stone foot hanging off the rock as her legs hung parted, with a grinning little totally psychotic-looking cherub-type angel standing on the lady's open thighs and pointing an arrow at where the stone robe hid her cold tit, the woman's face upturned and cocked and pinched into that exact same shuddering-protozoan look beyond pleasure or pain (p. 373).

This is an image of representation, a picture of Bernini's 'The Ecstasy of St. Teresa', where the colloquial register makes a mockery of religious piety, as St. Teresa's experience is reduced to that of sexual lust—the language employs slang (tit) not befitting of a saint. It's expression following the rape ('post-diddle') is said to mimic that of St. Teresa during transverberation, and is not the only occasion where St. Teresa is referred to in the text. The first explicit reference occurs during Joelle's attempt at committing suicide in the bathroom at Molly Notkin's party. Joelle's narrative allows for another strand of gender discourse to form, for Joelle's use of the veil is at once intriguing and disruptive to the text. Joelle (a.k.a. Madame Psychosis; P.G.O.A.T., or Prettiest Girl Of All Time; and Lucille Duquette), maintains a powerful presence in the novel despite her suicidal tendencies, and her narrative is one of only a handful that traverse the two main locations of the novel, Ennet House and Enfield Tennis Academy, and that influences the novel's main plots. With respect to existing criticism of *Infinite Jest*, Joelle's character is often overlooked and undervalued as a tool with which to analyse Wallace's *magnum opus*. In this reading, Joelle's narrative undergoes close analysis in order to consider Wallace's choice of a veil as an object that comes not only to define Joelle's character, but that further questions societal notions of female 'beauty', and the 'place' of women in society. The use of the veil throughout the novel demonstrates that this is an item often misunderstood in Western culture.

Published at a similar time to *Infinite Jest*, Nancy J. Hirschmann's article, 'Western Feminism, Eastern Veiling, and the Question of Free Agency', focuses

on the practice of veiling by questioning its impact on feminism and on Western and Eastern notions of freedom.<sup>37</sup> While there are significant differences between Wallace's text and that of Hirschmann's, the veil acts as a unifying presence, raising questions, and allows for philosophical enquiry—both of which are important aspects of Wallace's texts. To this end, two separate extracts from the novel are analysed. The first is a scene where Don Gately and Joelle are in dialogue. Throughout, Gately tries to coerce Joelle into sharing the details of her facial 'deformity' with him—the 'deformity' believed to be the contributing factor leading Joelle's to adopt the wearing of a veil as part of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (pp. 531-8).<sup>38</sup> The second extract is taken from what appears to be an interrogation of Joelle's former roommate Molly Notkin, where Molly is subjected to a rigorous 'grilling' under the glare of a 'portable high-watt lamp' while suffering the indignity of having her eyebrows removed so as not to cast any shadows upon her face, and which came about 'by polite but emphatic request' (pp. 787-95).

Joelle is first introduced in the guise of Madame Psychosis, suggesting a theatrical element, and at this stage it is not apparent that she is indeed Joelle (p. 181). The first sense of Joelle's voice comes later as her point-of-view influences the third-person narration, which discusses at length her ambivalence at attending her flatmate Molly's party prior to her impending suicide attempt. Here, Joelle is 'at the end of her rope and preparing to hang from it', in a figurative, not literal sense (Joelle favours overdose above hanging) (p. 219). Visually, Joelle's appearance is likened to that of a child, and there is no mention at this point of her face as she sits with feet that 'dangle well off the floor', and as her 'pale knees and white rayon kneesocks and feet in clogs that are hanging half off, legs swinging like a child's, always feeling like a child in Molly's chairs' (p. 219). Following this, it is confirmed that Joelle is 'a lot of fun to be with, normally, if you can get over the disconcerting veil', and here is the first clue that Joelle is Madame Psychosis, who also wears a veil (pp. 219-20). The veil acts as both physical and cultural barrier, forcing the reader to consider that some work must be done in order to access Joelle's 'fun' aspects, while 'a

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<sup>37</sup> Nancy J. Hirschmann, 'Western Feminism, Eastern Veiling, and the Question of Free Agency', *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 5 (1998), 345-368

<sup>38</sup> Joelle's 'deformity' remains ambiguous—it is never resolved conclusively in the text.

lot of fun' also hints at the use of drugs throughout the novel: Joelle uses the phrase 'too much fun' to describe her impending attempt at suicide by overdose (p. 238).

At this point the narrator discusses 'pernicious myths' that often accompany suicides, before offering the reader the 'truth' of such matters (p. 220). The question is: whose truth? As stated earlier, the narrator appears in the third-person, with Joelle's point of view influencing the narrative.<sup>39</sup> Is the narrator offering the 'truth', or does this come from Joelle, or elsewhere? The matter is unclear and there is little time to pause over this before the reader discovers how Molly and Joelle first met whilst on a doctoral program. Molly 'often confides' in Joelle, and an example of the 'one tormented love of Notkin's life so far' corroborates this before Joelle reflects on the fact that 'she and poor Molly Notkin are just the same. [...] With her fear of direct light, Notkin. And the disguises and whiskers are simply veiled veils' (p. 220). Joelle's point of view evokes a sense of theatre with its talk of 'disguises and whiskers', and implies that there is also a performative element to Molly Notkin's outward appearance, which is key to this reading of *Infinite Jest*. The inference is that is the case for the majority of people who adopt 'disguises' to suit a situation (once more invoking Butler's notion of performativity). Molly is dressed, farcically, as a Marx brother, and so this may indeed account for a disguise and whiskers, but note that Joelle uses the plural, 'disguises', intimating that her present disguise is merely one of many. Upon reflection, Joelle exhibits a level of self-consciousness that allows her to understand that she also has access to disguises, in the same way that Molly does, and that she wishes her disguise to be literal, not figurative. Joelle chooses the veil, as opposed to Molly's veiled veil, and she seems comfortable in her choice:

Joelle is thinking about what she has in her purse. She sits alone in her linen veil and pretty skirt, obliquely looked at, listening to bits of conversation she reels in and out of the overall voices' noise but seeing no one really else, the absolute end of her life and beauty running in a kind of stuttered old hand-held 16mm before her eyes, projected against the white screen on her side, for once, from Uncle Bud and twirling to Orin and Jim and YYY, all the way up to today's wet walk here from the Red Line's

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<sup>39</sup> And as already shown, the third-person narrative voice influenced by character point-of-view is a strategic device used throughout the text.

Downtown stop, walking the whole way from East Charles St., employing a self-conscious and kind of formal stride, but undeniably pretty, the overall walk toward her last hour was, on this last day before the great O.N.A.N.ite Interdependence revel (pp. 220-1).

In this cinematic description, where the sentence flows like a scene from a film, Joelle appears unfazed at the fact that she is the only one in the room wearing a veil. She is at once seeing herself, and seeing herself being seen by others (but not seen because of the veil). Her calmness, remarkable given that she is about to attempt to commit suicide, affords her the luxury of 'listening to bits of conversation' whilst reflecting on her life and on the day's events. Note, though, the ways in which 'pretty' and 'beauty' are used as descriptors by the narrator: a veil is not enough to save Joelle from culturally prevalent norms where describing a woman's 'looks' is concerned.

Speaking of how ubiquitous such words are as descriptors of women, the first such occasion does not seem out of place as we are conditioned, culturally, to accept certain adjectives appearing next to items of women's clothing—pretty.<sup>40</sup> Pretty, as in a pretty skirt or blouse, is a modifier that works (in the way that pretty shirt and tie do not) because of the way societal notions continue to associate the aesthetics of outward physical appearance primarily with that of women, in terms of the obsession with how women are supposed to appear, and how they must groom themselves in order to conform to standardized and popularized conceptions of 'beauty', at least as is understood in Western cultures. This links with the use of 'beauty' to describe Joelle's life in its entirety as she steps closer to killing herself, and by ending her life she will also end the beauty that is seemingly unproblematically entwined in that life. When considering the phrase, 'employing a self-conscious and formal stride', an image forms of someone who is noticeably aware of the gaze of others, and of the societal 'norms' that must be negotiated, and that they are self-conscious of their actions. Joelle adopts a manner of walking that has an almost militaristic sound to it. 'Formal' follows a set pattern, adhering to convention, and 'stride' indicates long steps. To suggest that this style of walking is 'undeniably pretty'

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<sup>40</sup> Note the link back to the same word in the chapter on *Broom*.

creates an interesting juxtaposition to consider—why should Joelle's formal stride be said to be undeniably pretty?

The issue of 'prettiness' plagues Joelle. She is later described as the prettiest girl of all time (P.G.O.A.T.), a person starring in Jim Incandenza's film (*Infinite Jest*), from which the book borrows its title, and which is now considered lethal because the majority of viewers have since died as a direct result of watching it. Here, there is a problem. Joelle is said to be the prettiest girl of all time, but the reader is also led to believe that she is currently disfigured, facially, by acid, hence the reason for wearing the veil. The narrator furthers this sense of ambiguity by obscuring the issue of her beauty/deformity. For instance, Molly Notkin, whilst under interrogation from Rodney Tine Jr., Chief of Unspecified Services, gives her version of events leading up to Joelle's alleged disfigurement. Firstly, there are the circumstances of Molly's testimony to note. It is known that Molly has had her eyebrows removed, and that a portable high-watt lamp is shining directly on her face: 'it was this, the harsh light on her fully exposed post-Marxist face [...] that prompted M.I.T A.B.D.-Ph.D. Molly Notkin [...] to spill her guts, roll over, eat cheese, sing like a canary, tell everything she believed she knew', which implies guilt on Molly's part (pp. 787-8).<sup>41</sup> Yet, Molly's testimony during the interrogation scene is brought about by fear and intimidation, and this renders her version of events as suspect, the bulk of which seems to come in quick-fire succession as indicated by Molly's use of 'that' at the start of each episode she describes. During the interrogation Molly only ever refers to Joelle as 'Madame Psychosis', highlighting the performative nature of her actions, and which introduces another element of suspicion.

Towards the end of the interrogation Molly tells her interrogators about how Joelle's mother learns that Joelle's father is so 'secretly, silently in love with' his daughter as she hits puberty that to try to avoid molesting her he has to 'compensate [...] by regressing the child [Joelle] to an age of incontinence and pre-mashed meat' (pp. 793-4). Both the father's actions, and those of the mother that we are about to hear, add to examples of parental complicity that are on display throughout the text (the abuse of children by family members).

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<sup>41</sup> The post-Marxist comment would appear to refer to her party disguise as a Marx brother.

Indeed, Molly tells of how 'the mother had hurled the low-pH flask [acid] at the Daddy, who'd reflexively ducked; [...] leaving Madame Psychosis [...] open for a direct facial hit, resulting in the traumatic deformity' (p. 795). Though Molly's version sounds credible on first reading it seems less so as the passage undergoes further scrutiny, and it is impossible to tell whether Joelle is facially disfigured by acid or not. As stated earlier, Molly is under interrogation and her retelling of the events that were told to her by Joelle reveal that at the time of telling Molly of the events, Joelle had already adopted the veil. Molly is not a witness to the events, and nor has she seen Joelle unveiled, a fact located in endnote 328, which follows the narrator telling that Molly had seen Joelle naked, 'though never unveiled', which perhaps also doubles as a way of considering Joelle's psychic state (p. 1072). Through careful consideration of the text, it is possible to conclude that Molly cannot know whether Joelle's face is disfigured, whether by beauty or acid.

To add to the confusion that exists around Joelle's introduction at Molly's party, the narrator describes Joelle locking herself away in the bathroom in preparation for her suicide, and that Joelle is 'deveiled, too pretty for words, maybe the Prettiest Girl Of All Time (Prettiest G.O.A.T.)' (p. 239). Later in the text appears Joelle's own testimony, as she converses with Gately:

Don, I'm perfect. I'm so beautiful I drive anybody with a nervous system out of their fucking mind. Once they've seen me they can't think of anything else and don't want to look at anything else and stop carrying out normal responsibilities and believe that if they can only have me right there with them at all times everything will be all right. Everything. Like I'm the solution to their deep slaving need to be jowl to cheek with perfection. [...] I am so beautiful I am deformed. [...] I am deformed with beauty (p. 538).

Note the link here with that of Wallace's essay, 'The Empty Plenum'. Where Wallace discusses the figure of Homer's Helen and of how Helen:

[...] is 'guilty' finally not because of anything she's done but because of who she is, how she appears, what she looks like; because of the effect she has, hormonally/emotionally, on men who're ready to kill & die over what they're made to feel. Kate, like Helen, is haunted by an unspoken but oppressive sense that '...everything is her [own] fault' (Wallace, 'Plenum', pp. 230-31).

Joelle is yet another extension of such thought, where her perception of her own beauty is turned into a defect because of the effect her beauty has on others. Joelle, in the manner Wallace suggests of Helen in 'Empty Plenum', is acted upon in this respect, but where Joelle differs from this analysis is her response to the feeling of being 'deformed with beauty', where she acts by donning the veil. Although there is scope to consider Joelle as akin to the figure of Helen, and subsequently that Helen Steeply becomes a substitute for Joelle (in Orin's eyes), this passage may be a form of sarcasm on Joelle's behalf, which is how Gately reads it, for it calls into question the nature of Joelle's 'disfigurement': is Joelle disfigured with beauty or by acid? And whatever the case, what factors are behind Joelle donning the veil?

To confuse matters further, there is also Joelle's first person, direct speech account of why she wears a veil, which occurs towards the end of the novel. Joelle is interviewed, in much the same style as the interviews in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, where the letter 'Q' marks the interlocutor's questions, and where the reader only has access to Joelle's words. Here, Joelle discusses how she 'used to go around saying the veil was to disguise lethal perfection, that I was too lethally beautiful for people to stand. It was kind of a joke [...] [t]hat even in U.H.I.D. I hid by hiddenness, in denial about the deformity itself' (p. 940). It seems clear that ambiguity remains around Joelle and her beauty/deformity, for the above passages do not give an indication of the present state of her facial features. Thus, whether Joelle is deformed by acid or deformed by beauty, the most salient aspect is that she chooses to wear a veil, and that she is perfectly at ease with that choice. Joelle's choice of a veil blocks the gaze of others, removing from them any power that may reside in such an act, thus empowering Joelle.

There are several occasions where Joelle's use of the veil is brought into question. The first two examples of this associate the veil with the bridal tradition. Continuing on her walk to Molly's party, Joelle passes '[t]hree young black men perched like tough crows along a bench's back [who] approve her body and call her *bitch* with harmless affection and ask where the wedding's at' (p. 222, emphasis original). Shortly after, when Joelle is in Molly's bathroom attempting to overdose, she lifts 'her veil back to cover her skull like a bride' (p.

235). The third and final example to discuss here occurs while Joelle and Don Gately are in dialogue. Don asks her to 'tell me about this veil of yours, then, Joelle, if we're talking about defied sense'. At first Joelle continues talking without acknowledging Don's question. Don persists: 'Really. Let's really interface if you're in here. How come with the veil?' To which Joelle replies, '[b]ridal thing', which leaves Don speechless (indicated by ellipses), before she adds, '[a]spiring Muslim' (p. 533). Both appear to be false clues that Joelle provides for Don, as she is not likely to marry or to convert to Islam.<sup>42</sup>

Joelle's playfulness, in the mention of 'aspiring Muslim', provides a suitable comparison between the practices of some non-Western cultures and the group she is bound to through her use of the veil: U.H.I.D. Joelle goes on to discuss U.H.I.D. at length but, much to Don's annoyance, does not answer the question of why she wears the veil, nor why she considers herself deformed. Hirschmann discusses that '[a]s developed in Western political theory in particular, the free agency of the natural individual is seen as a core defining value. By contrast, in non-Western cultures, other values such as community, kinship, or nation – all affiliative ideals of some kind – often appear to take priority in defining what a 'human being' is' (Hirschmann, p. 346). Joelle's use of the veil works in similar terms with respect to community, kinship, and U.H.I.D., where Joelle puts aside Western notions of free agency as an individual, at least in terms of her outward appearance, to join a union that favours the veil as a method of 'hid[ing] from all sight' (p. 534). This is not strictly true, because the members make themselves more visible to a viewing Western public, where veils are not commonplace. The face is hidden from view, yet the person wearing the veil has full visibility—the dynamics of spectatorship are thus changed. To emphasize her need to wear the veil, Joelle goes on to explain:

But Don you're still a human being, you still want to live, you crave connection and society, you know intellectually you're no less worthy of connection and society than anyone else simply because of how you appear, you know that hiding yourself away out of fear of gazes is really giving in to a shame that is not required and that will keep you from the kind of life you deserve as much as the next girl, you know that you can't help how you look but that you are supposed to be able to help how much you

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<sup>42</sup> The veil is never associated with Holy Communion, but the leap to make such a connection seems an obvious one to form given the description of Joelle as child-like.



*care* about how you look. You're supposed to be strong enough to exert some control over how much you want to hide, and you're so desperate to feel some kind of control that you settle for the *appearance* of control (pp. 435-5, emphasis original).

Joelle talks about the time prior to donning the veil, where her 'deformity' is evident for all to see and when she feels too exposed by it. Of importance here, and throughout Wallace's works, is the use of 'you': deployed on twenty separate occasions in a passage of one hundred and thirty-nine words, accounting for just over fourteen percent of the words used.<sup>43</sup>

This is significant when considering the effect that the pronoun has on the conversation between Joelle and Don. If Joelle uses the pronoun 'I', then there is a distance between her reliving the feelings she had prior to choosing the veil, and this must have an impact upon Don's understanding of her motives. By repositioning the view from 'I' to 'you', as a generalizing pronoun, Joelle offers the experience to Don, if he is willing to accept her viewpoint. In doing so, Don is positioned as the human being who still wants to live, and who deserves a life as much as the next girl, paradoxically. This strategy also transfers the viewpoint to the reader, for 'you' is a word that acts as an open reference. Another possibility is that Joelle externalizes her own experience in the use of 'you', thus providing several viewpoints from which to approach this particular moment in the text—once more a problematization around notions of spectatorship. Also worthy of note, in a discussion of the pronoun 'you', is the acronym U.H.I.D.: 'you hid'. Joelle continues in a similar vein with the same pronoun when she explains the process of accepting the veil as the solution to her problem:

In other words you hide your hiding. And you do this out of shame, Don: you're ashamed of the fact that you want to hide from sight. You're ashamed of your uncontrolled craving for shadow. U.H.I.D.'s First Step is admission of powerlessness over the need to hide. U.H.I.D. allows members to be open about their essential need for concealment. In other words we don the veil. We don the veil and wear the veil proudly and stand very straight and walk briskly wherever we wish, veiled and hidden, and but now completely up-front and unashamed about the fact that how we appear to others affects us deeply, about the fact that we want

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<sup>43</sup> Uses include you, you're, and yourself.

to be shielded from all sight. U.H.I.D. supports us in our decision to hide openly (p. 535).

The move from 'you' to 'their' to 'we' bears similarities to Orin's perfect union of 'I' and 'you' into 'we'. The change in register is subtle, but striking in that it allows a connection to form between Don and Joelle, in spite of the fact that Don is clearly not a member of U.H.I.D., which in this sense acts as a social group that Joelle is a part of precisely because she wears the veil. This connection is made more explicit by the repetition of 'we don the veil', where it is no coincidence that Don's name mirrors Joelle's taking of the veil.

The veil takes centre stage. People see the veil, not the face with its expressions of hurt and 'shame'. Joelle goes about her daily business with a renewed sense of purpose, as conventional notions of spectatorship are disrupted. Joelle finds a solution to her problem through the veil, though a temporary one given that she attempts suicide. In Wallace's inclusion of the veil, Hirschmann's work is apt in that is 'precisely because veiling is 'other' to most Westerners [that] it may be able to reveal aspects of the West to which Westerners are blind, such as assumptions about individuality, agency, and difference, as well as Western feminists' lack of self-consciousness about our own practices, including our forms of dress' (Hirschmann, p. 348). Wallace's use of the veil in relation to Joelle's character not only reveals aspects of a culture that some are too blind to see, and also allows for a questioning of culturally formed assumptions around the practices of others. Specifically, the veil strips away gender identity from an outward perspective (U.H.I.D. is made up of men and women). In addition, the veil also offers power and control over the gaze of others—Joelle can see others but they cannot see her face.

During Joelle's suicide attempt, an opportunity to discuss the veil and its association with Christianity arises, as the veil is associated with St. Teresa. While attempting to overdose on freebase cocaine Joelle is reminded of the figure of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture 'The Ecstasy of St. Teresa:'

The 'base frees and condenses, compresses the whole experience to the implosion of one terrible shattering spike in the graph, an afflated orgasm of the heart that makes her feel, truly, *attractive*, sheltered by limits, de veiled and loved, observed and alone and sufficient and female, full, as if watched for an instant by God. She always sees, after inhaling, right at the apex, at the graph's spike's

tip, Bernini's 'Ecstasy of St. Teresa', behind glass, at the Vittoria, for some reason, the saint recumbent, half-supine, her flowing stone robe lifted by the angel in whose other hand a bare arrow is raised for that best descent, the saint's legs frozen in opening, the angel's expression not charity but the perfect vice of barb-headed love (p. 235, emphasis original).

As the 'base cocaine hits, bringing with it a huge 'high', Joelle is said to 'always' see Bernini's statue of St. Teresa. The 'spike in the graph', a metaphor for the corporate monitoring of figures, describes the very peak of the drug-fuelled high, mirroring the tip of the arrow that the angel holds, poised as it is above the figure of St. Teresa. Joelle's 'afflated orgasm of the heart' is likened to that of the experience of St. Teresa during one of her visions, and just as Joelle keeps herself behind a veil whilst in public, Bernini's Teresa, according to the narrator, is kept behind glass at the Vittoria, which introduces the notion of a barrier that does not impede spectatorship.<sup>44</sup>

This is Bernini's vision of St. Teresa, and of her ecstasy, and a mediated one, in the form of sculpture fashioned from rock. Like Kate, the protagonist of David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, and Wallace's Joelle, Bernini's St. Teresa is once more the product of a man's mind. Historically, man's vision of woman often ties women to the body, which speaks of the Madonna-Whore complex and notions of the Fall. Such willingness to place emphasis on a woman's body is seen in Diane Evans's critique of Bernini's statue:

[M]any have mistakenly taken Bernini's interpretation as being on par with Teresa's original translation. Mieke Bal writes, 'although sculpture is not a set of words, iconographic analysis treats it as if it were just that'. (2003, 9) Lacan and Bourgeois have fallen into the trap of only analytically and artistically interpreting Bernini's work, rather than focusing on Teresa's writings which emphasized Christ-centred practicality, prayer, compassion, piety, reform, and humility over and above mystical experience and have therefore created incomplete translations.<sup>45</sup>

The veiled body of St. Teresa, in the form of Bernini's sculpture, obscures St. Teresa's writing from view, according to Evans. She suggests that the actual felt experience St. Teresa writes about is lost in the act of translating it into a

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<sup>44</sup> A 'fact' that does not appear to be true.

<sup>45</sup> Diane Evans, *Translations of the Ecstasy of St. Teresa of Avila*, (2015)

<<http://www.stmarys.ac.uk/inspire/docs/translations-of-ecstasy-july-2015.pdf>>

readable form, albeit through 'iconographic analysis'. Whereas Evans shifts the focus away from the image and onto the writing, St. Teresa's inclusion in *Infinite Jest* focuses on the visual. In a parallel sense, I argue that Joelle's importance to *Infinite Jest* is obscured from view because of her use of the veil. Joelle's veil acts as a barrier to Western society, which is perhaps why the majority of critics fail to provide any form of sustained engagement with her narrative. Such failure speaks to the blindness that Hirschmann associates with the veil and Western culture. As for St. Teresa's experience, as Evans suggests in her discussion of Bernini's statue, it is argued that there is always some aspect of meaning that is lost in the process of turning felt experience into art.

Returning to the description of the apex of Joelle's freebase cocaine-high, 'an afflated orgasm of the heart that makes her feel, truly, *attractive*, sheltered by limits, deveiled and loved, observed and alone and sufficient and female, full, as if watched for an instant by God', the context is once more set around notions of watching and being watched (spectatorship), and it is evident that Wallace conflates the idea of the orgasm with an intense feeling of the heart (p. 235, emphasis original). This creates something at once sexual in origin, while elevating it to a level of purity: the feeling manifests itself not through a sexual organ but through a part of the human body (the heart) that is meant to convey emotions such as love. Elevating the sexual act of orgasm in this manner links Joelle's feelings with St. Teresa's, but it is worth remembering that this is Bernini's interpretation of St. Teresa's experience, and so the focus is once more with the image, the visual, and spectatorship. Wallace, via Bernini, presents a sexualized being in the middle of an unholy rapture, recumbent and half-supine (p. 235).

Wallace's use of Bernini's vision of St. Teresa becomes ever more disturbing and farther away from her writing of the experience of transverberation. The narrator describes the angel's hand lifting her 'flowing stone robe', while her legs appear 'frozen in opening'. This speaks of a familiar narrative of woman in a sexualized role: passive, not active, waiting to receive that which is given (think of the fair maiden in Wallace's 'AIDS essay', or readings of Lenore Beadsman). The angel *appears* to be lifting St. Teresa's gown, but this happens closer to her breast. Bernini's statue depicts St. Teresa in the

state of transverberation, as she is no longer waiting for the arrow of God to penetrate her heart—the moment has passed. Instead, the angel replaces the folds of her robe following the piercing: ‘Bernini’s sculpture does not depict the piercing, only its after-effects. The backward drapes of the folds of the angel tell the viewer that the arrow has been withdrawn; Teresa is now beyond herself, burning, and in a state of ecstasy’ (Evans, p. 8). Furthermore, St. Teresa’s legs cannot be seen under the weight of her gown: only her feet are visible. In this respect, it is a misreading to suggest that her legs are opening. Here, Wallace’s use of language makes obvious the failure of words to describe what is happening in Bernini’s art, and in many ways sums up the limitations of a verbal representation of iconography.

In this instance, the narrator’s description of Bernini’s St. Teresa is merely another example of the idea of the ‘sexual’ encoding a woman’s body, albeit via a man’s mind: a fate similar to Markson’s Kate. However, where Wallace differs in his use of woman is in the subtle associations pairing Joelle with St. Teresa throughout the novel, and in his choice of St. Teresa as a point of reference: both of whom are linked by the veil. Note how far removed the reader is from St. Teresa in this instance of mediated imagery, in itself a form of veiling. Wallace’s narrator describes Joelle’s vision of St. Teresa’s vision, which is actually Bernini’s interpretation of that vision in the form of sculpture.<sup>46</sup> In fact, we know that Joelle has not seen the sculpture first-hand because Joelle laments the fact that she has never been to Rome: “The Ecstasy of St. Teresa’ is on perpetual display at the Vittoria in Rome and she never got to see it’ (p. 238). The image she brings to mind is an *image* of Bernini’s statue. Wallace’s use of the image of St. Teresa represents a symbolically productive form of failure, making clear the failures inherent in our present language system when attempting to describe an experience. Wallace’s text exposes the gap between the original experience and that which it signifies.

Wallace’s use of St. Teresa is spread throughout *Infinite Jest*, as is Joelle, although to a much larger extent than is credited in the wider critical sphere. Indeed, Hayes-Brady views Wallace as having an ‘apparent reluctance or inability to write strong female characters [...] despite an almost pathologically

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<sup>46</sup> Thus, there are multiple levels of mediation for the reader to contend with.

repetitive invocation of [...] femininity'.<sup>47</sup> Here, Hayes-Brady does not define her use of 'strong', nor provide concrete examples of why Wallace's female characters lack strength. Hayes-Brady does not conduct a close textual analysis of Joelle's character, overlooking Joelle's importance in the process. The veil may be responsible in this respect, as feminism in Western culture often has fixed views on the use of the veil as something that speaks of repression and as an obstacle to liberation (Hirschmann, p. 345). Joelle's use of the veil may speak of repression, yet there is also the possibility that it acts as a form of liberation, as it wields a form of control with respect to what others see.<sup>48</sup> In the discussion that follows, I argue that Wallace blends aspects of masculinity and femininity throughout certain main characters in *Infinite Jest*: Don Gately, though huge and capable of extreme violence, is tender and caring more often than not; Avril and Jim Incandenza are almost doppelgangers in terms of their appearance; and Hugh/Helen Steeply morphs from an unconvincing disguise into a role where s/he 'passes' as a woman (erotically, for some).

One minor character worth including at this point is Poor Tony Krause. Poor Tony is on the periphery of the novel's action, but his inclusion brings with it an acknowledgement of gender-dysphoria as an actuality for some. While suffering drug withdrawal symptoms, 'Poor Tony Krause stamped his foot and simply refused to believe things could feel any worse. Then he stopped being able to anticipate when he needed to as it were visit the powder room. A fastidious gender-dysphoric's horror of incontinence cannot properly be described' (p. 301). Though the pronoun use centres on he/him/his where Poor Tony is mentioned in the text, he is offered to the reader as a person living as a woman. Much of this is used for comedic effect, but again, this is the case for most if not all characters in *Infinite Jest*. And gender-dysphoria is not simply a passing comment, as later Poor Tony meets associates at 'Inman Square's Ryle's Tavern, which had Gender-Dysphoric Night every second Wednesday, and attracted comely and unrough trade' (p.691). In tying gender to feelings of dysphoria, the text once more allows for the questioning of gender as axiomatic,

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<sup>47</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, "'...': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 131-150, (p. 19)

<sup>48</sup> And note that in *Infinite Jest*, the veil is worn by men and women.

which is precisely in line with Sedgwick, Butler, and Halberstam's thoughts on the subject, respectively.

### 5.5 Gender as a Hybrid Concept

In a similar manner to the discussion in Chapter Three, of Joan Crawford's role as Mildred Pierce, Avril Incandenza encapsulates both masculinity *and* femininity, and is vilified for this transgression. Not only does this highlight the rigidity of the social systems governing gender, but also the way in which everyday roles in life are assigned according to gender. If Mildred is the precursor to the kind of woman who wants to have a family, career, financial independence, and still maintain her attractiveness to others, then Avril encapsulates the 'superwoman ideal' that grows from the successes of the feminist movement of the 60s.<sup>49</sup> This also links back to Eve Sedgwick's 'Sabrina' talk discussed throughout the Introduction, where double binds cause women always to second-guess what society requires of them.<sup>50</sup> Again, the monumental effect of Sedgwick's arrival at Amherst cannot be underestimated, and is commented upon by Andrew Parker, Wallace's 'favourite' teacher: 'Eve's "Sabrina" talk Dave certainly would have known even if he wasn't in attendance--it appeared verbatim in the student newspaper and dominated local discussion for months'.<sup>51</sup> Wallace's writing of Avril, 'the Moms' (itself a generic term), as successful businessperson, academic, activist/terrorist, mother, wife, and the possessor of a rampant sex drive, fits the period in which the novel is published, and the cultural environment in which women are trying to 'succeed'. Backing up her claims of double binds for women, Sedgwick notes the prevalence of psychological testing during the 1950s, where to be considered 'psychologically feminine' a person must first adhere to 'norms' of femininity (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 15).

The key, yet conflicting message borne out of the 'superwoman ideal' is that women can 'do it all and have it all', yet studies today show that the

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<sup>49</sup> Sara M. Martino and Shaelene R. Lauriano, 'Feminist Identity and the Superwoman Ideal', *Journal of Behavioral Health*, 2 (2013), 167-172, (p. 167)

<sup>50</sup> Eve K. Sedgwick, 'Sabrina Doesn't Live here Anymore', *Amherst*, 37 (Spring 1985), 12-21

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Parker, Query on Memory and 'French Feminists' (2020)

pressure upon women who believe that they 'should' have it all (family, career, independence, etc.) increasingly leads to 'experiencing stressors as a result', and Avril acts as a perfect example with which to explore this thought (Martino and Lauriano, p. 167). Carolyn Elliott writes that '[i]n an effort to establish themselves professionally, while preserving their identities as women, many women today try to do everything: to become "superwomen"'.<sup>52</sup> The paradox is that professionalism somehow endangers a woman's identity as a woman, in that her femininity is at risk as she becomes more professional, and the inference is that by troubling her femininity in this way she becomes more masculine and thus some sort of threat to society.<sup>53</sup> This is the position that Sedgwick sets out at Amherst while Wallace is still a student. Elliott's work on the 'superwoman phenomenon' illuminates the conflicting demands and emotions that result when a woman attempts to balance a career (paid work) with responsibilities of childcare and household tasks (unpaid work). Elliott notes that 'when women take on new tasks, they don't give up old responsibilities' and that '[w]omen are socialized to assume responsibility and to maintain relationships', which chimes with the long list of roles that Avril performs as wife, mother, businessperson, and academic (and that stand in stark opposition to Jim Incandenza who devotes his time to making films while drinking himself to oblivion on bourbon whiskey) (Elliott, p. 26). Recent research concludes that in 2009/10, married mothers spend almost twice as much time on both housework and childcare duties as married fathers.<sup>54</sup> Wallace's text makes evident the disparity that exists between Jim and Avril in this area, and also highlights the ways in which they are treated differently as a result of their actions, such as in romantic and sexual relations with others.

For instance, Jim is not reproached for forming a relationship with Orin's girlfriend, Joelle, and Hal's first-person perspective tells that 'Orin will also grant that there's no doubt Himself [Jim] was faithful to the Moms right up to the end, that his attachment to Orin's fiancée was not sexual' (p. 957). This may

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<sup>52</sup> Carolyn Elliott, 'The "Superwoman" Phenomenon', *Women's Studies Newsletter*, 8 (1980), 26-27, (p. 26), in JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42796640>>

<sup>53</sup> Precisely the way in which Mildred Pierce was condemned and then punished for her transgression, according to Peter Biskind (refer back to Chapter Three).

<sup>54</sup> Suzanne M. Bianchi and others, 'Housework: Who did, does Or Will do it, and how Much does it Matter?', *Social Forces*, 91 (2012), 55-63, (p. 58).



reflect denial on Orin's part, through Hal's eyes, and is generous and forgiving where his father's actions are concerned, especially when the text hints that Orin's relationship with Joelle is the one in which he feels he has achieved near perfect union with another person and that he may never do so again. Orin preserves Jim's moral decency by asserting his father's faithfulness to his mother. Orin's feelings towards his mother run contrary to the forgiveness of his father's indiscretions, and this in spite of the fact that Avril is a loving mother to all three of her children. Indeed, Sedgwick notes the feelings of 'contempt' that are exhibited towards those in a 'maternal supportive role', and the word contempt links back to Orin's sexual encounters with young mothers (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p.15). Converse to Jim's treatment is the way that Avril is mocked and derided for her sexual activities. These range from long lists of people she has meant to have had sexual encounters with, the perception being that she will have sex 'with just about everything with a Y-chromosome', to the unsubstantiated accusation that she also commits incest with Orin (p. 791).

The narrative voices of *Infinite Jest* are so complex that to corroborate Avril's sexual 'improprieties' is near impossible, yet Avril is held responsible, in part, for her husband's suicide because of her 'excessive' libido, and Orin punishes her for this through silence. The text supports the claim that Avril's sexual activity with others is responsible for driving Jim mad, and to drink. Attempting to converse with his youngest son, Hal, Jim sets up a meeting between the two: Jim is disguised as a 'professional conversationalist' (p. 28). Hal is only ten years old and Jim becomes unhinged as the conversation wears on, turning the topic to Avril's many, alleged, sexual affairs:

'That you could dare to imagine we'd fail conversationally to countenance certain weekly shall we say maternal... assignations with a certain unnamed bisexual bassoonist [...]'  
 'Gee, is that the exit over there I see?'  
 '...that your blithe inattention to your own dear grammatical mother's cavortings with not one not two but over *thirty* Near Eastern medical attaches...?'  
 'Would it be rude to tell you that your mustache is askew?' (p. 30, emphasis original).

Jim's persistence at discussing the matter is clearly of discomfort to Hal, who uses humour to deflect the conversation away from tales of his mother's alleged

sexual encounters. Jim's disguise as a professional conversationalist fails spectacularly because of an inability to listen and respond to his son—the notion of performance is once more used for comedic effect as Jim's disguise malfunctions.<sup>55</sup>

Jim continues to rant about Avril, while just prior to the above exchange Hal tells Jim, 'I'm *ten* for Pete's sake' (p. 30, emphasis original). Avril is just as much of a sex-addict as Orin, yet the two receive different treatment in the text. Though Orin's hypersexualized actions do not bring happiness, his many encounters are not laid bare in the same way as his mother's. For instance, later in the novel Hal spends time reflecting on what his mother must experience during her sexual encounters:

I had a sudden and lucid vision of the Moms and John Wayne locked in a sexual embrace [...]. It was impossible for me to imagine Himself and the Moms being explicitly sexual together. [...] Sex between the Moms and C.T. I imagined as both frenetic and weary [...] I imagined the Moms's eyes open and staring blankly at the ceiling the whole time. [...] [Marlon] Bain, graduate students, grammatical colleagues, Japanese fight-choreographers, the hairy-shouldered Ken N. Johnson, the Islamic M.D. Himself had found so especially torturing [...]. I tended to imagine the Moms staring expressionlessly at ceilings throughout (p. 957).

Hal, now a teenager, spends an unusual amount of time considering his mother's reactions during sex, and his vision of her is one of passivity. For Hal, his mother is acted upon, and shows no signs of pleasure in her many sexual encounters. The narrative judgment around Avril's sexuality shows her as a stereotypically passive woman and chimes with Wallace's handwritten comments on Biskind's text: that of two taboos that exist for women, female sexuality is number one on the list (Hal denies his mother's sexuality by viewing her in this way).

The narrative voices of the novel are too unreliable to know whether Avril gleans pleasure from her many sexual encounters, but we know that she, like Orin, suffers from a kind of pathological anxiety and that this manifests itself in Avril's Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (O.C.D.) (p. 1039, fn.234). When

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<sup>55</sup> Jim's role as professional conversationalist is another indicator of the influence that psychotherapy plays throughout Wallace's *corpus*. And the mustache also bears links with Molly Notkin's Marx brother disguise, discussed earlier.

discussing the concept of the superwoman ideal, Martino and Lauriano state that 'women are being pressured by society as well as putting pressure on themselves to do a majority of the child rearing and caretaking (being primarily responsible for household duties such as cooking and cleaning) while also taking on masculine roles such as career success, and competitiveness' (Martino and Lauriano, p. 168). Avril's role in the text is like that of a would-be superwoman, as she performs many roles for herself and her family (a feat that Jim does not attempt to emulate), and she suffers as a result through her obsessive compulsiveness, which speaks of the 'gender oppression' that Sedgwick discusses in her closing remarks (Sedgwick, 'Sabrina', p. 21). Another aspect of the ideal that fits with Avril's character is Martino and Lauriano's assertion that the superwoman suffers:

[N]eurotic perfectionism in which the individual is not able to accept failure and is driven more by this factor as opposed to the actual desire to achieve. Superwomen display this neurotic perfectionism in their drive to have it all. Unfortunately as the superwoman adheres to a persona that is seen as smart, autonomous, nurturing and attractive, she is also putting herself at risk for various factors that can be both psychological and physiological (Martino and Lauriano, p. 168).

Two examples of Avril's neurotic perfectionism are seen during Helen's 'interview' with Orin. The first, where Orin tells Helen about Avril's role in the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts:<sup>56</sup>

M.G.M.s for instance go around to Mass. Supermarkets and dun the manager if the Express Checkout sign says 10 ITEMS OR LESS instead of OR FEWER and so on. The year before The Mad Stork's death the Orange Crush people had an ad on billboards and little magazine-fall-out cards that said *CRUSH: WITH A TASTE THAT'S ALL IT'S OWN*, with like a possessive IT'S, and I swear the M.G.M. squad lost their minds; the Moms spent five weeks going back and forth to NNYCity, organized two different rallies on Madison Avenue that got very ugly, acted as her own attorney in the suit the Crush people brought (p. 1039, fn.234, emphasis original).

This captures Avril's neurotic perfectionism with respect to grammar use, but also demonstrates Avril's proclivity for adopting new roles when she feels it is necessary (attorney, in this instance). Avril takes on new roles without first

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<sup>56</sup> The M.G.M.s perform a kind of policing of language in their actions.

unburdening herself of all the other roles, and this is in keeping with the superwoman ideal.

The second example of Avril's neurotic perfectionism occurs when Orin relates to Helen a tale of Hal as a young child eating a '[b]ig old patch of house-mold' and presents this to his mother, as she prepares the soil in the garden ready for spring, an allusion to Eve, which once more indicates stereotypes (p. 1042, fn.234). Avril's obsession with gardening, according to Orin, is just another thing 'she *had* to do', and that she did so by 'making lists and pricing supplies and drafting outlines in January', which seems premature for work that begins in the spring (p. 1041, fn.234, emphasis original). While out in the garden Orin recalls his mother wearing 'two pairs of work-gloves and plastic surgery-type bags over her espadrilles [...] [a]nd a Fukoama microfiltration pollution mask', which is excessive for the task of tilling the soil (p. 1042, fn.234). As Hal presents the half eaten mold to her, Orin provides a flavour of the chaos that reigns as Avril's neurotic perfectionism is disturbed by factors outside of her control. He describes the following as the brothers' 'first taste of apocalypse':

'Help! My son ate this! My son has eaten this! Help!' she kept screaming, running in tight little right-faces just inside this perfect box of string, and I'm seeing The Mad Stork's face at the glass door over the deck, with Mario's face all squished against the glass from supporting his weight, [...] so finally it was Mr. Reehagen next door, who was so-called 'friends' with her, who had to come out and over and finally had to hook up the hose (pp. 1043-44, fn.234).

This example confirms Avril's conformity to the superwoman ideal, itself a form of stereotype. Not only does she perform a task of hard, manual labour by operating the tilling machine while her husband looks on (framing the scene as if for one of his films, indicating spectatorship once more) but she is expected to act as care-giver when Hal wanders over with the piece of mold he has part eaten. Additionally, another example of Avril's neurotic perfectionism is when she revises her grammar even as she screams and runs around. Technically, both phrases are grammatically correct but Avril is attempting to choose the most precise form of language to best express what has just transpired.

Avril combines traditional masculine role (working the earth) with traditional feminine role (care-giver), along with a stereotype of the hysterical woman as she runs around screaming (adding a farcical element), while Orin's first-person narration casts aspersions about her relationship with the next-door neighbour. Avril wants to be a success in everything she attempts, and is for much of it. She looks after her three children and husband, works as an academic, and also helps to run the Enfield Tennis Academy. In relation to career roles, Martino and Lauriano assert that it is through work that '[m]any men view career success and the role of the family provider as a defining piece of their own masculine identity' and that subsequently, '[t]he modern day woman has the pressure to maintain traditional roles that encompass femininity, in addition to roles that are traditionally masculine' (Martino and Lauriano, p. 168). It is clear from the above examples that this is exactly the kind of situation that Avril is subjected to, one where she must combine both masculinity and femininity in her quest to achieve the superwoman ideal. It is evident that Avril exhibits a more fluid gender position than society allows for. And there is another example of a main character who displays masculinity and femininity as a combined feature rather than as traits that cannot co-exist.

It is in Don Gately that we see this, and this is significant to the text because Don is of huge physical stature, is capable of extreme violence, and is perhaps the character a reader would least expect to exhibit aspects of femininity. Don acts as caregiver to the residents of Ennet House, and sacrifices his own safety in the line of duty when he prevents Randy Lenz from being killed by 'Nucks' (Quebecois/Canadians). Here, violence in the text is not attributed solely to men, for during Gately's defense of Lenz a number of Ennet House residents assist him as he is both outnumbered and lacking in weapons. Among the women residents who fight alongside Gately is Nell Gunther, who 'leaps several twirling meters and kicks the Nuck [...] in the face with her paratrooper-boot's heel', and 'Clenette H. and Yolanda W. [who] are now up [...] getting solid high-heel kicks into the Nuck's [...] ribs' (p. 614).<sup>57</sup> Stephen Delfino explains away Gately's actions as, 'violent only as a protector, blending his violent [phallic] masculinity with the nurturing, testicular one' (p. 39). Delfino

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<sup>57</sup> Nell's choice of boots offers yet another combination of masculine and feminine.

fails to note the actions of the women residents in their participation of violent acts, and so one is left to wonder what anatomically led traits they exhibit in their display of violence.<sup>58</sup>

Gately learns his care-giver role through repetition, in a similar manner with which he commits repeated acts of violence throughout his life, though with very different outcomes stemming from each of these roles. In this manner, I argue that Gately performs gender in line with Butler's theory, via adherence to cultural markers that determine which tasks/roles are feminine, and which are masculine. Gately practices male femininity *and* male masculinity, discussed momentarily, just as Avril practices female femininity *and* female masculinity where necessary. Here, traits of gender are shown as more fluid and less fixed. Another example of Gately's role as care-giver concerns Pamela Hoffman-Jeep, a woman who 'fell automatically in love with any man she termed 'chivalrous' enough to carry her out [...] and drive her home without raping her, which rape of an unconscious head-lolling girl she termed '*Taking Advantage*' (p. 924, emphasis original). Pamela accepts that being so drunk as to become unconscious is to accept rape if it occurs. Rachel Himmelheber discusses the issue of alcohol and its use in the blurring of consent, and this has echoes of the opening chapter of *Broom*, which mimics rape-culture rhetoric that ever places the onus on women to *avoid* being raped, and is described by Clarice Beadsman as the 'common-sense' approach (see Chapter Two).<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Himmelheber discusses the prevalence of victim-blaming that exists in rape culture when stating that '[I]n a rape culture, alcohol is used to negate the need for consent, consent itself is predicated on the woman having to prove she did not give it, and women continue to be associated with their former cultural and legal role as property' (Himmelheber, 'Rape Culture', p, 529). Though many men are willing to 'violate her a little' while unconscious Gately does not, and the 'most sexual thing Gately ever did with Pamela Hoffman-Jeep was he liked to unwrap her cocoon of blankets and climb in with her and spoon in real tight, fitting his bulk up close against all her

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<sup>58</sup> And there is also the extended scene where Hal retells the events of his father's film, *Blood Sister: One Tough Nun*, which subverts traditional notions of violence with its tale of successive generations of streetwise nuns (p. 703-14).

<sup>59</sup> Rachel H. Himmelheber, "'I Believed She could Save Me': Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace's 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20'", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55 (2014), 522-535, (p. 532).

soft concave places, and then go to sleep with his face in her nape' (p. 932). This is not to suggest that Gately not raping Pamela is in some way a form of exemplary behavior, but merely used to highlight the ways in which Gately displays male femininity in caring for Pamela as he removes her from other potential forms of harm (and from other men who may use alcohol to blur issues of consent). The text also reveals that Gately's behaviour towards Pamela may even stem from childhood memories—his alcoholic mother is routinely abused physically and sexually, by her boyfriend known only as the 'M.P.' (p. 840).

Mrs Gately's boyfriend teaches Gately how to bench-press weights, and 'at age ten, [Gately] began to be able to bench-press more weight than the M.P.' (p. 841). As he recovers from the wounds that he suffers while protecting Lenz Gately reflects on this particular memory from his childhood, and the fact that even as a young child he was capable of acts of strength greater than that of his mother's abuser:

Gately tries especially hard now not to explore why it never occurred to him to step in and pull the M.P. off his mother, even after he could bench-press more than the M.P. The precise daily beatings had always seemed in some strangely emphatic way not his business. He rarely even felt anything, he remembers, watching him hit her. [...] When he was a toddler he'd flee the room and cry about it, he seems to recall. By a certain age, though, all he'd do is raise the volume on the television (p. 841).

Gately is traumatized by events as a toddler and protects himself by disengaging with the events that occur around him (notably, by watching television). This form of denial does nothing to prevent the ongoing abuse that his mother suffers, the details of which become more harrowing as Gately recalls:

When he'd been small he'd sometimes hear the springs and sounds from their bedroom sometimes in the A.M. and worry that the M.P. was beating her up on their bed, but at a certain point without anybody taking him aside and explaining anything to him he realized that the sounds then didn't mean she was getting hurt. The similarity of her hurt sounds in the kitchen and living room and her sex sounds through the asbestos fiberboard bedroom wall troubles Gately, though, when he remembers now, and is one reason why he fends off remembering, when awake (p. 842).

The process of remembering horrific moments from his childhood, along with a reflection of his own maturation as a child, lead Gately to recognize that the sounds coming from the bedroom may have been those of consensual sex acts. Yet there is also the troubled recognition, now that Gately is an adult, that he may very well have been listening to his own mother being raped by the M.P., because the sounds are so similar, which may also be a factor in the care he shows towards Pamela when she is drunk and unconscious. This is a serious topic, but the narrative style does not readily facilitate a somber approach, and so careful consideration of the text is required in order to explicate such moments.

Just ahead of the conclusion it is apt to note a couple of occasions of unwanted male on male penetrative acts that occur, that are at once literal and figurative. The literal example is that of Lucien Antitoy, a French-Canadian shopkeeper who has his own beloved broomstick inserted into his mouth (its tip sharpened to form a point), and forced all the way through his body (an act that Wallace's details most graphically), until it 'forms an obscene erectile bulge in the back of his red sopped johns, bursting then through the wool and puncturing tile and floor at a police-lock's canted angle to hold him upright on his knees' (Wallace, *IJ*, p. 488). The comedy accompanying this horrific scene is in the repetition of a word by the person impaling Lucien on his own broomstick: 'inutile', or pointless (Wallace, *IJ*, p. 488). David Hering notes a link between this scene and the next example of unwanted penetration that begins with a conversation between Hal and Orin Incandenza around superstition, which will eventually initiate 'two plot developments that lead to overtly supernatural events later in the novel'.<sup>60</sup> The figurative example is that of Don Gately recovering in hospital following horrific injuries inflicted as he helps to protect Randy Lenz from being attacked by 'Nucks' outside Ennet House. As Don convalesces, the ghost of Jim Incandenza, referred to as the 'wraith', 'permeates the barriers of consciousness, appearing at one point to literally feel Gately's pain' (Hering, *Fiction*, p. 29). This is one example where the wraith penetrates Gately's consciousness without his consent. Another more disturbing occurrence is described by Hering as a form of 'interaction', but that this

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<sup>60</sup> David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2016), p. 26-7.



'interaction is marked by a degree of uncertainty over the authority and agency of the wraith, who intrudes uninvited into Gately's consciousness in an act [described in the text as an act] of "lexical rape"' (Hering, *Fiction*, p. 29). Effectively, as Don lies in a hospital bed he is being raped with words. These two examples serve to reinforce this thesis' assertion of the heterosexual matrix as a dominant force, not only in this text but throughout Wallace's *oeuvre*. It is the violence of both scenes that marks the text's interaction with notions of the heterosexual matrix, and this becomes even more explicit as the next chapter deals with Wallace's short story collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

## 5.6 Conclusion

As shown, the use of comedic effect and shifting dimensions of performativity throughout the narrative serve to undercut readings of the text. However, in noting the narrative fascination with spectatorship, and also Wallace's own thoughts on the topic, as discussed in his interview with Larry McCaffery, the critical reader can start to realize the ways in which different viewpoints can be formed, thus allowing in-depth discussions to form around these issues. Wallace's point-of-view on gender is ironic and social, virtually satirical at times, so that even if a scene focuses on a particular character, the ironies broaden the comedy out to a social dimension. Additionally, the use of caricature throughout also allows for diverse perspectives, but first a reader must avoid convenient readings that ultimately restrict our approach, such as dismissing the women Wallace writes without performing a close reading around them in the first instance.

Similarly, allowing for non-conventional readings of gender, such as the discussion around gender hybridity, requires a commitment from the reader to not simply adopt a view of *Infinite Jest* as a text that offers implicit 'norms'. Instead, as shown in the complex portrayal of issues around parental complicity, and even culpability, there exists the possibility of challenges to dominant societal 'norms', though this very much depends on a reader's ability to consider the possibility for multiple viewpoints to form. Here, Butler's work is linked with elements of Wallace's texts in order to facilitate this, and provides

a theoretical framework with which to consider those moments. Equally, Sedgwick's impact on gender discourse through her 'Sabrina' talk at Amherst is shown as an influence on the elements of Wallace's text that are discussed throughout this chapter. Wallace's questioning of the language used around gender is more nuanced than his previous iterations seen in *Broom* and in his non-fiction, and there is a more sustained interrogation of the performativity of gender—the repetitions and codes that serve to make attributes of gender seem axiomatic to an unquestioning population.

In Wallace's next work of fiction, *Brief Interviews*, there is a continuation of many of the themes explored so far, and where gender relations are taken to extreme levels of discord. The significant emphasis placed upon gender discourse and gender relations in *Infinite Jest*, and the subsequent problematizing of conventional notions of gender explicated in the detailed analysis conducted throughout this chapter, is about to take a dramatic turn. Indeed, on first reading *Brief Interviews* seems a far less optimistic text. As will be shown, the reader is exposed to a vision of a world where fairly rigid notions of gender prevail. The reasons for this shift in perspective will be questioned in order to consider what the text sets out to demonstrate—that the absence of a fluidity of gender maintains the *status quo* of a hostile, violent society, where gender 'norms' and conventional notions of gender abound.

## 6. DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S 'HIDEOUS' MEN (AND BEYOND)

This chapter will focus on the language used throughout *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), continuing on from the previous chapter, where the notion of self-consciousness is vital to an understanding of the text and its place in the gender discourse of the period.<sup>1</sup> There is a continuation of themes that are present throughout Wallace's *oeuvre*, most notably around rape and sexual violence, which are present from the opening chapter of Wallace's debut novel, *The Broom of the System*.<sup>2</sup> As with the previous chapters, Judith Butler's work on theorizing gender will prove to be indispensable to my hypothesis. This reading considers the context of the book, highlighting major themes and concerns, before moving on to a more nuanced discussion of the work based upon Wallace's use of language with respect to the figuration of relationships that are so routinely governed by gender, and the way in which notions of gender are constructed and performed around us. In this respect, it is Wallace's engagement with rape and sexual violence where the subject matter appears to be at its most provocative, and deliberately so, which offers the clearest insight into a consideration of his work in relation to gender discourse.

Following his success with *Infinite Jest* (1996), David Foster Wallace publishes *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), a collection of short stories written in a range of styles that include dictionary entry, transcript, and pop quiz, to name but a few. At first glance its themes appear to contrast wildly with

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System* (London: Abacus, 2011).

each other, where the difficulties of person-to-person communication, the awkwardness of familial relations, a consideration of the mediatized gaze, and acts of sexual violence and rape are juxtaposed to create an unsettling effect (a continuation of themes from earlier works). The stylistic and thematic elements of the text serve to inhibit the reader's experience of working through the book, as the reader has to adjust to the changes that take place as one story ends and another begins, particularly with respect to narrative voice (as also demonstrated in the previous chapters), diction, and form. Upon reading the book for the first time it is unclear how the pieces are meant to work together as a collection, and so multiple re-readings of the text are required in order to explicate this.

For instance, the book is named after the short stories, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', which appear on four separate occasions throughout the text, and which account for roughly a third of the overall content of the book; whereas in fact, it is this information that confirms that the majority of the book (two-thirds) is given over to stories that do not belong to the 'Brief Interviews' series of stories. This is the first issue of ambiguity: that *Brief Interviews* is not just about the 'Brief Interviews'. Secondly, the added complication that the 'Brief Interviews' are not always brief, nor are they structured in ways that befit, entirely, the use of the word interview. The 'Interviews' tend to be abstracted from concrete situations, appearances of participants, etc., and so present an abstracting literary form with little conventional narrative—they are about narratives but are not strictly narratives. Thirdly, the use of 'hideous' as an adjective is odd when considering the derivation of the word and its use in relation to the noun, men. Dictionary definitions of hideous tend to lead with the example that the word means to be 'offensive to the senses and especially to sight: exceedingly ugly'.<sup>3</sup> This definition of hideous does not fit with the stories, as the majority are not concerned with physically repulsive men, and so the secondary definition of the word must be considered: to be 'morally offensive; shocking' (Merriam-Webster, Web). This is an example of how the whole volume induces self-consciousness over certain terms, thus foregrounding

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<sup>3</sup> Anon., *Definition of "Hideous"*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hideous> edn, 2019 vols (Merriam-Webster).

language, implying a negative point of view where the men are concerned. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace deploys the word hideously in its commonest form, meaning ugly and unsightly, and this is attached most closely as a descriptor to Joelle van Dyne (the 'prettiest girl of all time', or P.G.O.A.T.), as part of U.H.I.D., which, as shown in the previous chapter, is fraught with ambiguity.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when reading the text a reader must apply meaning to some of the words Wallace uses, because if not, ambiguity and uncertainty about their use abound. By participating in this way, the reader adopts a position with which to view the text, becoming more self-conscious about the decisions made in relation to the text—Wallace's probing of language use around gender discourse disrupts axioms of gender.

Finally, a consideration of how the adjective alters the noun, 'men'. By adding hideous, to make the title *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, there is an indication that a position can be taken with respect to these men. If all of the men are considered as behaving in a hideous manner, a type of radical-feminist point of view, then there must not be any ambiguity in the text to counter such a viewpoint. In Wallace's use of men, as opposed to *some* hideous men, the all-encompassing element hints that *all* men are to be viewed as hideous. Ultimately, and with specific reference to the title, before we even open the book Wallace's choice of and use of words tells us that what we are about to read is in no way straightforward, and that we may be required to perform mental gymnastics in order to reach an informed reading of the text.

## 6.1 Language and the Disruption of Gender

Where Wallace's text is most original and unconventional in the 'Brief Interviews' stories is in its use of a woman as absent interlocutor: Q. Q's absence can be read as a silencing of the female, relegating her to the margins of the text. However, in doing so, the strategy offers a way of thinking that has far more in common with Judith Butler's work around dismantling culturally prominent notions of gender. Wallace achieves similar ends through his work

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<sup>4</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest: A Novel* (London: Abacus, 2009).

but in order to consider this fully it is necessary to privilege quality over quantity with respect to women characters and point of view—true of much of Wallace’s fiction. It is also important to distinguish between Wallace and Butler, who works in and through an activist’s role, fuelled by a particular brand of politics. In contrast, Wallace performs more as a social and cultural commentator on the peculiarities of gender. This is also appropriate when we consider Butler’s role as an academic and Wallace’s as a writer of fiction, primarily. Some of the broader concerns raised within the text create an awkward juxtaposition with that of the title, creating tension through contradiction. Throughout the book, as with much of his work, Wallace presents a mostly heteronormative, nuclear family type structure of gender relations. Wallace conducts a prolonged engagement with notions of gender, the ways in which we all learn from a very young age to ‘perform’ gender (how to ‘be’ a boy/man or girl/woman) according to societal and cultural norms. In a recent interview for *The Guardian*, Butler confirms this kind of indoctrination into gender in a discussion of how girls ‘are “girled”, [and] are entered into a realm of girlhood that has been built up over a long time – a series of conventions, sometimes conflicting, that establish girlness within society’.<sup>5</sup> Butler’s intervention in this discussion of gender references girls in particular, while *Brief Interviews* demonstrates perfectly Wallace’s interest in how language influences views of gender—this is the text that Wallace calls a feminist parody of feminism.<sup>6</sup>

For example, throughout *BI* there is a critical engagement with arrogant and manipulative men. Such characters make controversial and provocative statements, only to exhibit an overt self-consciousness of what they say. There is also a concern with how versions of lives are constructed through a mediatized gaze, and of how choices are brought to us as we mature from childhood into adulthood—in particular those moves into defined gender roles. Another prevalent theme is the alleged effects of divorce and inadequate parenting on a child’s psyche and the negative effects those parents have upon their children—yet another damning critique of the nuclear family structure. A

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, ‘We Need to Rethink the Category of Woman’, *The Guardian* (2021).

<sup>6</sup> D. T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 247.

further aspect of negativity surrounding the heteronormative household is the issue of domestic violence. The theme of violence continues further with Wallace's preoccupation with rape and sexual violence, a striking feature of his writing that, as has already been shown in the previous chapters, is prevalent throughout his major works of fiction and which reaches its crescendo in this text. This reading differs dramatically from Edward Jackson's, who views *Brief Interviews* as a work that amongst other things 'uses the threat of violence as a means to affront feminist discourses that, ostensibly, attack men for such characteristics'.<sup>7</sup> For reasons that will become clear as the chapter progresses, Wallace's text will be shown to have the potential to provide a critique of such violence, and not merely to extend its reach further. Earlier in the section where Jackson references the 'queer negativity' that he sees as an essential part of Lee Edelman's work (specifically used in relation to the 'sexual negativity' that he sees as a hallmark of Wallace's writing), Jackson states that Wallace's texts somehow ensure that 'toxic male sexuality survives to see another day', as if there is no merit whatsoever in the examples of toxicity on display (Jackson, *Toxic*, pp. 7-8). Again, this thesis differs in its conclusions with respect to the overt levels of violence that are contained within Wallace's text.

The contents of the book are extremely graphic in their depiction of acts of sexual violence and in their description of abhorrent thought, and the book is deliberately provocative in its approach, where the reader is challenged to confront her/his own viewpoint around certain situations. Considering this, it is odd that the book receives scant attention in the decade following its publication (1999 - 2009), where there is a relative lack of critical enquiry into the extreme aspects of gender relations. Marshall Boswell devotes a chapter of his book, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), to *Brief Interviews*, yet there are elements of his reading that are problematic. For example, Boswell asserts that 'Hegelian synthesis' is pivotal to Wallace's text and that the short story 'Octet' 'provides the key to [understanding] the entire book'.<sup>8</sup> Boswell notes the importance of the number eight, the number of pop quizzes the story

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Jackson, *David Foster Wallace's Toxic Sexuality: Hideousness, Neoliberalism, Spermatics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003, 2003), (p. 187).

is meant to contain, but does not: it contains five (with one such quiz numbered as Pop Quiz 9):

The number eight is 'organically unified' with its 'two-times-two-times-two' structure, and creates 'a Manichean duality raised to the triune power of a sort of Hegelian synthesis' (Boswell, p. 151). Careful readers of the book will note that Wallace provides sixteen 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', that is, two-times-two-times-two-times-two, the whole of which not only achieves the interrogative structure proposed in the 'Octet' but also constitutes, thematically, a Manichean duality resolved by a 'Hegelian synthesis' (Boswell, pp. 187-8).

There are indeed *eighteen* 'Brief Interviews', not sixteen. Therefore, the idea of an interrogative structure falls apart, and cannot achieve the synthesis Boswell wishes for. Earlier in the same text Boswell states again that there are sixteen interviews, which he refers to as a 'random sampling of some seventy-five such documents', when in fact the last interview is numbered 'BI #72' (Boswell, p. 182). More recent, Christoforos Diakoulakis' essay focuses solely on 'BI #20', and makes the case for it being a story about love: 'a love story - a story about a love story [...], an exemplary (if there is one), a proper 'love story''.<sup>9</sup> Diakoulakis asserts that:

Wallace knows it is nothing but the submission to the story of love/the story that is love, nothing but 'love' that makes love possible. Simply put, one *must* reduce love to 'love' and so betray love, in order to make love possible. One *must* tell a 'love story' in order to love. 'Love' is the necessary presupposition of love. This is the hypothesis of 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20' (Diakoulakis, p. 148).

Diakoulakis' assertion marks a rather unambiguous start to a piece of criticism dealing with 'the fourth and last homonymous short story from his [Wallace's] homonymous collection of short stories', which is remarkable given that Diakoulakis' notion of 'BI #20' being a love story seems to overlook the fact that rape and sexual violence are the dominant themes at work within the story (Diakoulakis, p. 147).

Similarly, Clare Hayes-Brady, in the introduction to her essay, complains of a 'surprising absence of direct feminine narrative: those female characters

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<sup>9</sup> Christoforos Diakoulakis, "Quote Unquote Love... a Type of Scotopia': David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*", in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media, 2010), pp. 147-155, (p. 147).



that appear are remarkably quiet', whilst going on to say that 'by contrast, the masculine figures that populate Wallace's writing are physically solid, vibrant and vocal'.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in somewhat of a Foucaultian move she goes on to note the ways in which:

Wallace's awareness of the inviolable strangeness of the female to the male consciousness leads to the opacity of his female characterizations, providing an oppositional balance with the forceful, dynamic males. Wallace's women, who wield the influence if not the power, form the silent, shifting center around which his representations of masculinity can locate their stable orbits (Hayes-Brady, p.131).

According to Hayes-Brady, Wallace writes his women as less vibrant than his men, in turn reinforcing the men's masculinity. More recent still, Rachel Haley Himmelheber's essay actually does deal with the hideous elements within *Brief Interviews*. Himmelheber makes the case for 'BI #20' 'function[ing] as intricate portraiture of an ever-morphing, cunningly adaptive rape culture', and that Wallace's story serves to highlight the normativity of sexual violence in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Once more this ties in with Wallace's exposure to Sedgwick's 'Sabrina' talk at Amherst, and the harmful, learned behaviour that Sedgwick suggests cultivates in young men while at college.<sup>12</sup> Himmelheber takes her lead on rape culture from second-wave feminism, arguing the existence of a dominant culture where rape and sexual violence are normative parts of life in the U.S. (Himmelheber, p. 522). Likewise, Laurie Penny, a leading proponent of feminist thinking views rape culture as '[t]he cultural acceptance of rape', which substantiates Jia Tolentino's and Kelly Yang's accusatory tone towards U.S. higher education establishments, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

In light of her views on rape culture, Himmelheber takes Diakoulakis to task by accusing him on a number of occasions of 'misread[ing]' the text and even of offering an 'irresponsible interpretation' of it (Himmelheber, p. 525).

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<sup>10</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, "'...': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace", in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 131-150, (p.131).

<sup>11</sup> Rachel H. Himmelheber, "'I Believed She could Save Me': Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace's 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20'", *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55 (2014), 522-535, (p. 522).

<sup>12</sup> Eve K. Sedgwick, 'Sabrina Doesn't Live here Anymore', *Amherst*, 37 (Spring 1985), 12-21.

<sup>13</sup> Laurie Penny, *Laurie Penny on Steubenville: This is Rape Culture's Abu Ghraib Moment*. <http://www.newstatesman.com/laurie-penny/2013/03/steubenville-rape-cultures-abu-ghraib-moment> (NewStatesman, 2013).

Himmelheber conducts a thorough analysis of 'BI #20' and makes clear that Diakoulakis' 'vision [of the text] is disturbing', and that 'Diakoulakis misses multiple layers of Wallace's narrative by aligning himself in his reading with [Wallace's] hideous man' (Himmelheber, p. 525). Significantly, in her critique of Diakoulakis' essay, Himmelheber reveals the pitfalls, intricacies, and ambiguities that exist in Wallace's use of language, all of which contribute to Diakoulakis' 'misrepresent[ing] the story's meaning as focused on love rather than a critique of rape culture' (Himmelheber, p. 528). In doing so, Himmelheber reinforces my suggestion that Wallace's text may well be a rare example of a male-authored work of literary fiction that critiques rape culture, rather than espousing it. Himmelheber suggests this in part by noting the way in which the interviews are 'constructed' by 'a narrator or narrators' who are at once 'determining the boundaries of story', and that 'the interview's incompleteness as a document, [is] in service of the aims of an off-stage narrator who is interested in critiquing gender relations' (Himmelheber, 'Rape Culture', p. 525). This manner of thinking about the stories aligns with this thesis' claims and highlights the extra detail in those stories that do not merely use aspects of rape culture to further the narrative.

## 6.2 Rape and Sexual Violence

Close to two decades on from its publication, the opportunity to engage with the challenging aspects of this work exists precisely because of the style of the stories, where the reader is positioned oddly. For example, a female interlocutor, Q, interviews various men referred to by a number that is attached to their particular interview.<sup>14</sup> The question and answer style of the interviews is made more challenging for the reader because there is access only to a partial transcript: the words of the interviewees, never the interviewer. Hayes-Brady notes the way in which the 'truncated narratives operate as a peculiar hybrid of monologue and dialogue that in their very incompleteness draw attention to,

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<sup>14</sup> For example: BI #20 (hereafter, all of the stories' interviewees will be referred to in this manner; similarly, the stories will also be referred to in this way but with inverted commas added to denote that it is a story, for example: 'BI #20').

and so rupture, the bounds of their own construction'.<sup>15</sup> Hayes-Brady continues with mention of the 'muting' of the interlocutor known only as Q, and views this as confirming 'power relations [that] are starkly mediated by gender' (Hayes-Brady, *Failures*, pp. 149-50). Hayes-Brady continues by rightly pointing out the silence that accompanies Q's inclusion in the story, and makes a salient argument about the way in which the other silenced woman's voice (of the Granola Cruncher) begins to infiltrate the interviewee's voice until 'his narration is full of her language' (Hayes-Brady, *Failures*, p. 150). I would add to this by also reiterating the way in which the interlocutor is responsible for the narrative arc, as it must be remembered that she is the one transcribing the interview, and so the only words we have access to are the ones that the interlocutor gives to the reader. In this respect, then, both the silent interlocutor and the silent woman the story is about begin to dominate the text in spite of their respective silences, thus causing the interviewee to appear to 'lose control' (Hayes-Brady, *Failures*, p. 150). The narrative style certainly creates a form of distancing, making it easier for the reader to engage with the more perplexing aspects of the text: the reader remains sufficiently detached from challenging themes such as rape and sexual violence, and so are able to consider the effect that they have upon the text. It must be stressed here that in 'BI #46' and 'BI #20' the text appears to deal primarily with the language used around rape, the rhetoric of rape, a term borrowed from Sabine Sielke, and not merely the actual act of rape.<sup>16</sup> Sielke defines the term:

What I mean to suggest by this introductory excursus is that talk about rape does not necessarily denote rape, just as talk about love hardly ever hits its target. Instead, transposed into discourse, rape turns into a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts. [...] rape narratives relate to real rape incidents in highly mediated ways only. They are first and foremost interpretations, readings of rape that, as they seem to make sense of socially deviant behavior, oftentimes limit our understanding of sexual violence while producing norms of sexuality in the process (Sielke, pp. 2-3).

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<sup>15</sup> Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), p. 149.

<sup>16</sup> Sabine Sielke, *Reading Rape. [Electronic Book]: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, c2002, 2002), (pp. 8-10).

Wallace's use of rape and sexual violence is a way of engaging with gender discourse, and is highly mediated throughout the text. In taking a different approach to Himmelheber, where the prevalence of the notion of rape culture rhetoric within the stories is a fundamental part of her argument, this chapter suggests new ways in which the use of rape culture rhetoric may be read in order to challenge existing, and somewhat axiomatic views about rape culture itself.

In order to achieve this aim, a discussion of the ways in which Wallace uses language to create certain effects is considered. During a radio interview with Michael Silverblatt in 1999 whilst promoting *Brief Interviews*, Wallace admits to being "interested in misogyny" and interested in "hostilities, both political and emotional, between males and females".<sup>17</sup> Wallace theorizes on the root cause of misogyny, briefly, basing it in a "weird kind of fear", stating that although we are hyper-aware of what has come to be widely known as the objectivity of women, there is little in the way of discussion about "men's terror of women's judgement of them, and not just judgement sexually but judgment of them existentially, humanistically" (Bookworm). Wallace expands on this, stating that "being perceived and judged by another subjectivity is incredibly horrifying", and that "the kind of anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust can be read in the same terms" (Bookworm). Wallace concludes this part of the interview and faces no further questions from the interviewer about what are inflammatory statements, even stating that the "instinct to dehumanize the other, the instinct to turn the other into a means rather than an end is what a tremendous amount of our cultural flux and our cultural pain is about" (Bookworm). This thesis claims that Wallace's use of rape and sexual violence serves to interrogate such 'cultural flux' and 'cultural pain', and not to further such violence.

As already demonstrated there is sufficient ambiguity surrounding Wallace's work to permit an engagement with the treatment and use of gender within. Much of the ambiguity resides in Wallace's use of language and philosophical enquiry, which provides theoretical tools to develop and further

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<sup>17</sup> Craig Smith, *David Foster Wallace Interview on Bookworm* (1999), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCxoGM5pxOg> (YouTube).

engage with. This is where Himmelheber's article is most careful in its analysis of 'BI #20', for although she views this particular story as being about rape culture, Himmelheber does not position Wallace's work as further promoting such a culture, merely that rape culture *is* the dominant theme of the story. Himmelheber expands upon this when discussing the moment the story of a rape is retold in 'BI #20, and views the '[v]iolence [of the scene as] thus clearly linked with the phallic, but it is also responsible for profound revelation' (Himmelheber, p. 534). She asks the following question: '[a]re sharp objects vehicles of truth or vehicles of aggression', before stating that the imagery of the scene 'blur[s] the distinctions we crave, the distinctions a rape culture's untruths represent' (Himmelheber, p. 534). Himmelheber recognizes that Wallace's narrative conjoins around two sharp instruments: the rapist's knife; and the imagery of a needle's point, a metaphor for the victim's focus and concentration in an attempt at avoiding being killed following the rape: 'BI #46', is primarily a story concerned with rape. As stated, the interlocutor conducting the interviews is only ever referred to as Q in the transcripts, and although we know she is a woman, there is a good deal of ambiguity around Q because her words are not recorded: only the words that Q transcribes. In BI #46, there is a reference to the Holocaust stemming from the protagonist's unique treatment of Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*.<sup>18</sup> BI #46 tries to sustain the argument that if something good (Victor Frankl's book) stems from something bad (Frankl's experience of the Holocaust) then there must not follow a 'knee-jerk' reaction towards the bad: 'It's a totally great book and now think about it, if there wasn't a Holocaust there wouldn't be a *Man's Search for Meaning*' (p. 98).

In this instance, BI #46 is talking about violence, suffering, degradation, and the practice of stripping away a person's humanity by viewing them as something *other* than human, and that this is beneficial in certain circumstances. However, BI #46's primary concern is not the Holocaust, and he moves the discussion on to rape and sexual violence, and the 'positive aspects'

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<sup>18</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

he feels these may have on a 'human being in the long run' (p. 99). BI #46 states a concern with the 'afterwards' of these events:

[Who] are we to say getting incested or abused or violated or whatever or any of those things can't also have their positive aspects [...] in the long run. [...] Not that anybody ever ought to get raped or abused, not that it's not totally terrible and negative and wrong while it's going on [...] But that's while it's going on. [...] What about afterwards? [...] It's not impossible there are cases where it can enlarge you (p. 99, ellipses added).

Controversially, BI #46 clarifies that he is *not* stating that every case of violation, incest, or abuse ends with a positive outcome for the recipient of such acts, but that some *do* end positively, and that he just is not being 'knee-jerk' about it. Following this, BI #46 introduces us to the example he uses to state his case: a gang rape. BI #20's opening takes a different approach as he leads with a confessional moment where he declares that he 'did not fall in love with her until she had related the story of the unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed' (p. 245). The personal pronouns 'her' and 'she' refer to a character known only as the Granola Cruncher, a character subjected to rape, and about whom the story revolves, but whose voice we do not hear at first hand, and whose naming as the Granola Cruncher stands in obvious contrast to BI #20's confession of having fallen in love with her, as here she remains forever the generic, gendered 'her'.

To summarize the two openings, BI #46's protagonist believes that one 'great' book is worth the sacrifice of millions of lives, and BI #20's protagonist is able to 'love' only after finding out that the apparent object of his affection (the Cruncher) has suffered brutality in the extreme. Many of the stories' protagonists are capable of terrifying thought experiments, and are persuasive and unrelenting in their argument.<sup>19</sup> BI #46 meets resistance to his ideas from the interlocutor, Q, and from the story's beginning he has to repeat phrases such as 'Alls I'm saying is', in order to justify himself. Whereas BI #20, following his confession, actually shares a moment with Q, where the two of them appear to view the Cruncher's actions of getting into a car with a 'psychotic serial sex offender' as ill-judged and naive. This promotes a certain kind of gendered

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<sup>19</sup> For ease of reading, I will now refer to BI #46's protagonist as BI #46, and to BI #20's protagonist as BI #20.

stereotype in relation to rape narratives, where a woman's actions prior to an attack are questioned, as if getting into a car driven by a psychotic serial sex offender makes the woman somehow complicit in that which befalls her, which aligns with the 'common-sense' approach that Clarice Beadsman promotes (see *Broom* chapter). Here, 'the reader must confront the central allure of a rape culture's norms: that its lies offer protection. If a rapist is thoroughly other, an uneducated, psychotic stranger of another race, then perhaps we are safe when we engage in relationship with those who are not strangers, with those who are like us' (Himmelheber, p. 534). Himmelheber discusses, here, the way in which the interviewee tries to distinguish himself from the rapist, while exhibiting enough self-consciousness to actually voice the opinion that his actions, in his initial approach to the Granola Cruncher, are not all that dissimilar. Furthermore, the interviewee 'attempts to prove through self-awareness and political correctness his distance from the norms of a rape culture' yet 'the story repeatedly demonstrates his adherence to these norms' and in doing so unwittingly shows that the Granola Cruncher's 'particular rape, and her particular rapist, present [him with] an opportunity to acknowledge predatory aspects of himself without having to relinquish control over his presentation of self as a man incapable of "real" violence' (Himmelheber, p. 534). Again, this echoes Tolentino's account of the girl in the dorm room feeling responsible for events that may transpire following her inviting a boy to her room, and the ways in which Sedgwick sees all men as benefitting from rape culture. This shared moment between the two follows Q's second interjection, as BI #20 responds with: 'neither would I. Who would now, in an era when every - when psychotic serial killers have their own trading cards?' (p. 245). Q's change in approach goes some way to allowing for the consideration that there may be multiple viewpoints at work (rather than assuming that Q maintains a stable position in relation to the interviewees).

Zadie Smith dismisses BI #46's narrative because of the Holocaust reference. Smith comments that '[t]he Granola Cruncher is one of the few people in *Brief Interviews* not using another person as an example or as an object of "moral gymnastic equipment". She exists in a quite different moral realm from [...] the guy who twists Victor Frankl's Holocaust memoir [...] into a

perverse apologia for destroying another human being'.<sup>20</sup> Smith's analysis differs from Marshall Boswell's stance on the stories in question. Boswell states that 'as always in the Interviews, the actual reader is right there inside the piece, as both 'object' and 'subject', as the person addressed directly and whose empathy becomes the work's silent and therefore living dynamic force' (Boswell, p. 198). What follows next renders both Smith's and Boswell's analyses moot.

### 6.3 Q: The Absence of Woman

There are obvious complications within the stories that link with the shared ambiguity of the collection as a whole. Q's narrative absence is problematic, as is her role as interviewer, as the reader does not know in what capacity she acts. In addition, there is also the lack of specificity about the type of location where the so-called interviews are held—it may be that Q is conducting BI #46's interview in a secure facility. BI #20's interview is odd because he refers several times to drinks in a way that is more befitting of a coffee store/bar setting than of any other type of location.<sup>21</sup> Also problematic is the appearance of being told a story of an *other's* story by protagonists who have doubt cast upon them even before we meet them (indicated in the book's, and then the stories' title). Considering Q's absence from the narrative, it is unsurprising to hear Hayes-Brady conclude that 'Wallace's attitude to and representation of women is by no means beyond reproach; [...] his characterizations are frequently archetypal, almost stereotypical' (Hayes-Brady, p. 148). Hayes-Brady ends by saying that 'it seems clear that the gender power dynamics in Wallace's writing both depend on and reinforce the active presence of the masculine and the absent opacity of the feminine' (Hayes-Brady, p. 148). However, there is room to argue for another approach to Q's narrative absence, for Q's absence provides a 'cue' that the reader's skepticism is induced around the use of words.

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<sup>20</sup> Smith, Zadie, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), (p. 297).

<sup>21</sup> The occasions are: 'A refill? It's refill time, yes?' (p. 249); 'Care for another?' (p. 252); 'Though if you'd like another I'll buy you another no problem'. (p. 260); and, 'Let's both have one last one and then that will be it'. (p. 270) These are odd phrases to use when considering what we think we know about Q, and of course he could be using these phrases in an ironic way if the location were a secure facility and not a public place.



In Judith Butler's discussion of embodiment in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler states that the 'association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom'.<sup>22</sup> Butler poses the following question: 'If there is no recourse to a "person", a "sex", or a "sexuality" that escapes the matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those concepts for us, what constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of a constructed identity?' (Butler, p. 32). Butler's description seems befitting of Q in her role as the silent interlocutor who is absent from the text—she does not exist outside of the matrix of power, but her absence has the potential to invert that power.

I suggest that it is possible to view Q as an example of such an inversion, subversion, or displacement, precisely because Q does not have a voice—Q is not bound by the inadequacies of our present language system, where meaning is always and ever contested via the inconsistencies of signifier and signified. Q is not readily marked in terms of gender, or anything else for that matter. I argue that this is a sign of the 'incorporeal' that Butler describes, and that Q acts as an instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom, as Butler suggests is the case with the incorporeal, that has previously only been reserved for men. Furthermore, Butler asserts that 'if the subject is culturally constructed, it is nevertheless vested with an agency [...] that remains intact regardless of its cultural embeddedness. On such a model, "culture" and "discourse" *mire* the subject, but do not constitute that subject' (Butler, pp. 142-3, emphasis original). And in this respect, Butler reiterates the need for voices that can imagine alternatives where '[ge]nder then becomes a negotiation, a struggle, a way of dealing with historical constraints and making new realities' (Butler, *The Guardian*, 2021). It is in the presence of a silence that Wallace's Q differs from a culturally constructed model, precisely because of her absence from the text, which means that it is harder to mire her either by culture *or* discourse. Q

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<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), (pp. 11-12).

negotiates her way through a plethora of 'hideous' men, and in doing so fashions the respective transcripts to demonstrate the very worst aspects of gender relations, and from this the reader is able to imagine more positive outcomes (but much work is needed in order to effect this properly).

To consider this further, close attention must be paid to Wallace's choice of topic: rape and sexual violence—the most extreme and disturbing aspect of gender relations. The focus of the stories is on the rhetoric of rape, and how Wallace deploys this in the text is critical to our understanding of it. It can be argued that Wallace's text may be yet another example of rape being used, according to Sielke, as a 'discourse that establish[es] gender differences as differences in sexuality and [that] also construct female sexuality as victimization' (Sielke, p. 2). If we follow Smith and Boswell's reasoning we may end up reading the text in just such a way. However, we have already learnt that Smith will not allow herself to consider BI #46's story because of his unpalatable use of the Holocaust and that she is happy to make pronouncements about the 'moral realm' of the Granola Cruncher. Smith takes this approach without any clear justification for doing so, presumably making use of an equation, something akin to  $\text{woman} + \text{rape} = \text{victim}$ , without considering that to do so serves to further disempower a person who may not view herself as a victim but as a survivor. Likewise, Boswell is willing for us to 'play' the victim because this fits neatly with his notion of Hegelian synthesis. Furthermore, it is Boswell's flawed notion of Hegelian synthesis that leads to his suggestion that we should empathize with how it feels to suffer such a thing whilst also feeling empathy for BI #46. And as it turns out, BI #46 may have been the gang rape 'victim' after all—a suggestion made even more problematic when at the story's end he threatens to rape Q.

Wallace's treatment of rape and sexual violence is unusual when considering that the rhetoric of rape used here differs from those examples seen in countless works before, by the likes of Hubert Selby Jr., Vladimir Nabokov, Anthony Burgess, Martin Amis, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jonathan Franzen, where the use of rape seems to speak to the prominence of a dominant

rape culture.<sup>23</sup> Think of Tralala and the violence that occurs during the gang rape in Selby Jr's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, where even her name marks her, and her story, as insignificant, or the wanton use of sadistic and sexual violence in Ellis' *American Psycho*.<sup>24</sup> Admittedly, the introduction to 'BI #46' does not bode well in this sense, for no sooner does BI #46 mention the gang rape scenario than the narrative is heavily marked by gendered pronouns: 'she' and 'her'. This is apt if we consider the story as a misogynistic text replete with sexist attitudes, where the rape of a woman does little to alter the dominant modes of rhetoric with regard to female victimization. BI #46 continues to promote the belief that having undergone such extreme acts of violence 'she' can become 'bigger', 'enlarged', 'larger', 'deeper', - 'she can survive'. (p. 100). Not content with promoting this belief, he defends his ideas when they are met with Q's apparent hostility: 'That's the knee-jerk reaction [...] taking everything I say and [...] saying what I'm saying is Oh so the guys that gang raped her did her a *favor*' (p. 101). Such remarks express extreme viewpoints and do little at this stage to separate Wallace's work from those of his contemporaries.

Following on from the moment where BI #46 tells Q about the gang rape, he confesses that the woman in question, the 'victim', is his wife. He states that this is the reason he can speak with knowledge about such events. Little progress when one considers that 'she' has changed from being a gendered personal pronoun to a gendered pronoun indicating patriarchal possession: wife. BI #46 goes into intimate detail of the gang rape and the on-going medical care that 'his wife' needs to this day due to the severity of the attack, before posing the question of what is left of a person who survives such horrors: 'What does *you* mean now?' (p. 103). Where Wallace's works are concerned, 'you' occurs frequently in place of gendered personal pronouns. In fact, *you* is a problematic pronoun that does not signify much in terms of the standard ways we are taught to classify, whether by markers of ethnicity, class, gender, etc. Following this, all the aspects of the story that BI #46 recounts for Q fall apart. He suggests that he may not even be married and continues to retell the details of the gang rape, but this time he inserts himself into the narrative as the

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<sup>23</sup> As noted in the Introduction around Franzen and Ellis' novels, respectively.

<sup>24</sup> Brett E. Ellis, *American Psycho* (U.S.A.: Vintage, 1991); and Hubert Selby Jr., *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1966).

recipient of such violence before serving to cast doubt on whether any of what he has told Q has happened at all—and then comes the threat: ‘What if I did it to you? Right here? Raped you with a bottle? Do you think it would make any difference? Why? What are you? How do you know? You don't know shit?’ (p. 105). The repeated questioning of the notion of victimhood, and the accusatory use of ‘you’ has the effect of challenging the reader. Further consideration of the passage and of Boswell's analysis shifts the focus yet again. If Boswell is correct in his assertion regarding the question of empathy, and I argue that he is not, it is unclear with whom we should empathize. Perhaps we are to empathize with BI #46—but as the man he is now or as the sixteen year-old boy at the time of the attack; or do we empathize with she/his wife, who may not even exist; or presumably women in general; or do we empathize with Q, a woman about whom we know little? Our ability to empathize is problematized by the ever-shifting ‘facts’ of the story. Thus, the ambiguity that exists here speaks against the formation of neat conclusions, like Boswell's example above, and instead demands that the matter be pressed further.

In order to do so, the focus shifts to consider Kelley Anne Malinen's thoughts in her critique of Sharon Marcus' ‘Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words’.<sup>25</sup> Malinen, although discussing in her essay the topic of woman-to-woman rape provides space for a consideration of what she, borrowing from Butler, terms ‘gender transgressive rape’.<sup>26</sup> Malinen opens the essay by stating that ‘existing theories, both academic and commonsense, rely heavily on the male aggressor/female victim paradigm [and that] survivors who find themselves outside this framing are at an elevated risk for invisibility’ (Malinen, p. 360). Malinen notes the dangers of such thinking and offers an argument that leads to the acknowledgment of ‘myriad possible forms of sexual violence, something which cannot be done so long as we adhere strictly to the standard gendered paradigm’ (Malinen, p. 361). Although ‘BI #20’ appears to adhere to such a paradigm with its familiar tale of the violent stranger who commits an act of rape on an unsuspecting woman, it seems that via ‘BI #46’ Wallace's text offers

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<sup>25</sup> Sharon Marcus, ‘Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention’, in *Gender Struggles: Practical Approaches to Contemporary Feminism*, ed. by Constance Mui L. and Julien Murphy S. (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 166-185.

<sup>26</sup> KelleyAnne Malinen, ‘Thinking Woman-to-Woman Rape: A Critique of Marcus's “Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention”’, *Sexuality & Culture*, 17 (2013), 360-376, (p. 360).

something other than the standard gendered paradigm. There is also the question of whether BI #46 has a legitimate claim to tell such a story, and this is indeed complicated by the ever-shifting 'facts', but the prevalence of the man-as-perpetrator/woman-as-victim paradigm is evidently in question at this point in the text, where BI #46 asks Q:

[W]hat if I said it happened to me? Would that make a difference? You that are full of knee-jerk politics about your ideas about victims? Does it have to be a woman? You think, maybe you think you can imagine it better if it was a woman because her external props look more like yours so it's easier to see her as a human being that's being violated so if it was somebody with a dick and no tits it wouldn't be as real to you? (p. 105).

The ambiguity that surrounds 'BI #46' and its narrative means that at the story's end there is no clear sense of events. This appears as a provocative gesture on Wallace's part that actively forces the reader to take up a position with which to empathize, or not. It is evident from the passage that gender discourse plays a part in the formation of notions of victim and perpetrator, and by questioning Q in this manner the protagonist makes such discourse visible in order that it can be questioned more widely, shattering those culturally informed axioms. Again, this differs from Jackson's view of 'violence as a strategic aporia, and one that authenticates the idea that toxic sexuality cannot be reckoned with' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 10). Jackson is not invested in questioning the purpose of the ambiguity of the text, it would seem, instead preferring to make blanket assumptions to corroborate his own hypothesis on Wallace's use of violence.

As shown in the previous chapters, this positioning of a reader is a recurring feature of Wallace's works, where it forces us to confront the positions we adopt, sometimes unconsciously, by way of habit. In doing so, and with specific reference to the rhetoric of rape, by opening debates around gender transgressive rapes and by ending the rhetoric that sees 'rape as the fixed reality of women's lives', and also by ceasing to rely on the man-as-aggressor/woman-as-victim paradigm, there comes the destabilization of those cultural and social ironies that promote clear-cut notions of aggressor and victim, where a space seems always and ever ready formed for us depending on our own position (Marcus, p. 168). The challenging aspects of Wallace's work,

challenging not only because of their hideousness, but also because of their resistance to the formation of neat conclusions, serve as a timely reminder that there is much debate to be had in this area.<sup>27</sup> In terms of critical analysis it is apt to note that 'BI #20' receives more attention than many of the other 'Brief Interviews', perhaps because of its lengthier form, yet criticism is still sparse compared with Wallace's *oeuvre* as a whole. Again, this may be in part because of the problematic subject matter and the dangers inherent in attempting to criticize a man retelling of a near fatal case of rape, particularly when the narrator is known to have confessed to falling in love with the 'victim' of said crime (but only after hearing her retell the story to him following coitus). As with 'BI #46', there is much that upon first reading leads one to conclude that this is merely another example of a misogynistic text that dispenses well-known rape 'myths' freely, and without due care.

For example, the main aspect of the story upon which all else hinges is the fact that the Cruncher hitchhikes alone and gets into the first car that stops for her without taking the precaution of inspecting the car's occupant—and both Q and BI #20 share the opinion that this was indeed foolish on the Cruncher's part.<sup>28</sup> This surely ranks high on the list of many women's rape anxieties (the sex-criminal stranger) and one can imagine a hypothetical cross-examination of such a rape 'victim'—'so, you willingly got into the car dressed as you were!' It is not difficult to imagine a judgement such as this directed at a woman. Then there is the description of the Cruncher, whom we are told is an educated 'girl' but that her education is not her defining feature. Instead, there is the stereotypical image of a rape 'victim' authored by a man: pretty, sexually attractive, sexy, phenomenal body (p. 256). The 'facts' about the Cruncher are minimal and filtered through a very subjective point-of-view. To wit, there is an air of ridicule as BI #20 describes her 'strange', 'eccentric' face as being like that of 'a really sexy duck'. The racial theme extends itself also to her attacker, who happens to be mixed-race (a 'mulatto'—befitting of the stereotypical 'other'),<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Himmelheber's critique of care ethics throughout her 'Rape Culture' article, for example.

<sup>28</sup> BI #20 goes on to add that this fact is 'perhaps marginally less unbelievable in the context of her type', to which he lists many attributes. Here are just a few: 'daffy arcana', 'emotional incontinence', 'extreme liberality on social issues' (pp. 245-246).

<sup>29</sup> And that speaks of North American discourses such as the 'Southern rape complex' where 'sexual violation of white beauty by black beast figured the 'rape' of the South during Reconstruction and

and who is said to have 'aquiline and almost femininely delicate features' (p. 256).<sup>30</sup>

The Cruncher is further ridiculed as BI #20 extends the incredulity he shares with Q about the Cruncher's choice of ride when he states that 'in today's climate one wouldn't want to critique too harshly the idea of someone with a body like that getting into a strange automobile with a mulatto' (p. 256). Alongside such stereotypical rape 'myths', there is the stereotypical way in which the language captures the essence of the text's gender 'differences'. The mulatto, a man (notwithstanding his femininely delicate features), is connected with machine and instrument. The car he drives is a Cutlass (pirate association) and his trunk is full of 'implements whose very shapes could be envisioned from the sounds they made against one another when stirred by a conflicted hand' (p. 263). Contrast this with the way the Cruncher is cast with nature as she is able to 'distinguish lilac and shattercane's scents from phlox and lamb's-quarter, the watery mint of first-growth clover'—all this as she lies prone in her 'corbeau leotard beneath a kind of loose-waisted cotton dirndl' as she feels the 'press and shape of each piece of gravel against her face and *large* breasts' (p. 262, emphasis added). The descriptions fit with what we might consider as standardly misogynistic, and stereotypically gendered rape narratives. However, an alternative reading serves to complicate this, and similar to BI #46's narrative, lends opportunity to promote a more nuanced conclusion.

Indeed, having grabbed a 'machete or bolo' the mulatto (for that is how he is referred to in the text) sinks to his knees and is physically sick, BI #20 explains, whilst at that same moment the Cruncher forges a 'soul connection' with her attacker in an attempt at preventing him from killing her (p. 263). This is where the narrative becomes problematic, as the reader must adjust to the possibility that it is the mulatto who is somehow a 'victim'. After all, the mulatto is 'the one puking from terror' (p. 263). What, if anything, does this information

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legitimized retaliation through lynch violence' (Sielke, p. 2). And we must also note a problem with BI #20's use of 'mulatto' when he discloses that 'the rapist's mocha color and aquiline features could well be brahminic instead of negroid. Aryan in other words. These and other details she withheld - she had no reason to trust me' (p. 268). Why, having used 'mulatto' for the majority of the narrative (a term that specifically denotes the first-generation offspring of a black person and a white person) would BI #20 have cause to problematize our understanding of the rapist's ethnicity by introducing the term, 'brahminic'? And how is this even possible when he admits that 'these and other details [were] withheld' by the Cruncher?

<sup>30</sup> Once more, another moment of transgression where the male aggressor is linked with feminine features.

do to our reading of the text? Are we meant to empathize with the mulatto here? This possibility is problematized once more as the Cruncher, exhibiting a 'type of scotopia' during her seemingly frank retelling of events to BI #20, has her clothes cut away and is raped by the mulatto. But even this is problematic because as he approaches her, carrying lethal weapons about his person (machete/bolo, hunting knife), he is 'crying and chewing his lip like a frightened child, making small lost noises' (pp. 263-264). This form of narrative disruption continues as the 'sensual clarity she was experiencing in her state of total focus' leads to the following:

Imagine what this must have felt like for her, being raped in the gravel by a weeping psychotic whose knife's butt jabs you on every thrust, and the sound of bees and meadow birds and the distant whisper of the interstate and his machete clanking dully on the stones every thrust, she claiming it took no effort of will to hold him as he wept and gibbered as he raped her and stroking the back of his head and whispering small little consolatory syllables in a soothing maternal singsong. (p. 264)

One can imagine the kind of reaction this description of a violent sex attack might inspire in a reader. However, bearing in mind that we are discussing the rhetoric of rape and not an actual act of rape, there is potential that the narrative offers something other than misogynistic discourse.

For instance, if the purpose of the rape trope is merely titillation/entertainment, why so much detail about the Cruncher's 'unintentional but tactically ingenious way' of preventing or indeed transfiguring the rape so that it becomes what BI #20 classifies as an 'anti-rape?' (pp. 264-266). BI #20 refuses to tell the Cruncher's story with the Cruncher playing the part of the stereotypical 'victim'. Instead, he reinforces the Cruncher's focus and determination, whilst conveying information about what happens between the mulatto and the Cruncher in what is also an incredibly stressful situation for the reader. Indeed, the reader is able to experience the narrative's hideous elements as s/he reads that 'she [the Cruncher] kept her eyes steadily on his as he raised her poncho and gauzy skirt and cut away her leotard and underthings and raped her' (p. 264). The reader must also contend with the possibility that the Cruncher is 'giving herself instead of being quote taken by force, and that [...] she denie[s] the rapist the ability to dominate and



take' (p. 264). The stereotypical power relations between a rapist and his 'victim' are skewed—the Cruncher appears more in control of the situation whilst the rapist weeps and gibbers like a child. Returning a few pages to where BI #20 compares the mulatto's position as knife-wielding rapist with his own position as predatory male on the lookout for a one-night stand, even going so far as talking the reader through the type of pick-up he uses on the Cruncher as he deploys 'just the right rhetoric and push[es] the right buttons to induce her to come home with him' (p. 259), the narrator spouts the kind of rhetoric more closely associated with a type of radical feminist reading: 'all heterosexuality as rape, [...] the master metaphor for defining the violation of woman by patriarchy' (Sielke, p. 3). It certainly casts BI #20 in a particularly seedy light.

I argue that what the reader is presented with in these two short stories are not straightforwardly stereotypical rape narratives. Boundaries and certainties have been shifted somewhat: good/bad, rape/consensual sex, perpetrator/victim, victim/survivor. In his article on *Brief Interviews*, and during a discussion of sameness and difference, Adam Kelly asks: [s]o can the female ever speak back in a language so dominated by this reduction of difference to phallogentric sameness? As a partial answer to this question, this thesis once more asserts that Q is the one who has the power because it is she who is transcribing the words of the hideous men (and their phallogentric sameness), and through her silence she manages to speak louder than words.<sup>31</sup> The common markers of gender that perpetuate the myth that men are strong and dominant whilst women are weak and submissive, and that continue to be reinforced through contemporary forms of ideology to this day, and as Sedgwick makes clear in her 'Sabrina' talk at Amherst, are problematized by Wallace's narrative in its engagement with gender discourse, and this is consistent with my readings of Wallace's earlier fiction.

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<sup>31</sup> Adam Kelly, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 91.

#### 6.4 *BI* and Existing Criticism

Diakoulakis' short essay focuses solely on BI #20, where it makes the case that 'BI #20' is a story about 'love:' 'a love story - a story about a love story [...], an exemplary (if there is one), a proper 'love story' (Diakoulakis, p. 147).

Diakoulakis goes on:

That which connected the woman with the sex offender, 'something far deeper and more elemental than what we limitedly call quote unquote love, what from her perspective she calls connection', now connects the woman with the narrator: a 'love' story. It is the same 'love story' in fact, which in yet another repetition connects thereon the narrator with his apparently cynical addressee, as it also connects Wallace with his reader and me with you. [...] *this*, a narrative, will have *eventually* allowed one to connect with the other (Diakoulakis, pp. 152-54, 263, emphasis original).

Arguably, such a reading does not pay close enough attention to the text, instead preferring to cite Jacques Derrida at length. By paying close attention to the text one notices subtle hints that speak of the Cruncher's fate at the hands of BI #20, or that speak of something other than 'empathy' and 'connection'. For example, in the final moments of the story BI #20 tells Q:

But if you could understand, had I - can you see why there's no way I could let her go away after this? Why I felt this apical sadness and fear at the thought of her getting her bag and sandals and New Age blanket and leaving and laughing when I clutched her hem and begged her not to leave and said I loved her and closing the door gently and going off barefoot down the hall and never seeing her again? Why it didn't matter if she was fluffy or not terribly bright? Nothing else mattered. She had all my attention. I'd fallen in love with her. I believed she could save me. [...] I felt she could save me I said. [...] I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story (pp. 270-271).

Throughout the passage BI #20 uses the past tense as he describes a situation in which 'there's no way [he] could let her go away'. After all this talk of 'love' and 'connection' and 'empathy', it is possible that BI #20 kills the Cruncher in a desperate attempt at not allowing her to leave. What, then, does that do to our understanding of the text? There are certain clues in the text that support such a hypothesis. Throughout the story BI #20 exhibits an uncanny knowledge of the inner-workings of the mind of a 'psychopathic serial sex offender'. He even

defends what appears to be such an accusation from Q following a detailed discussion about what motivates 'sexual psychotics' to kill:

All right. Once more, slowly. That literally killing instead of merely running is the killer's psychotically literal way of resolving the conflict between his need for connection and his terror of being in any way connected. Especially, yes, to a woman, connecting with a woman, whom the vast majority of sexual psychotics do hate and fear, often due to twisted relations with the mother as a child. The psychotic sex killer is thus often quote symbolically killing the mother, whom he hates and fears but of course cannot literally kill because he is still enmeshed in the infantile belief that without her love he will somehow die. The psychotic's relation to her is one of both terrified hatred and terror and desperate pining need. He finds this conflict unendurable and must thus symbolically resolve it through sex crimes (p. 260).<sup>32</sup>

This is so matter-of-fact that it almost sounds rehearsed, as if such thoughts are long-held beliefs and not just a spontaneous response to a question in an interview setting. And although we do not know what Q says prior to BI #20 continuing to tell us what he tells us next, we can detect a form of defense mechanism in the way in which he deflects attention away from his own attempts at psycho-analysis:

Well still, though, it's not exactly what one would call esoteric is it since it's so much in the air, common knowledge about childhood's connection to adult sex crimes in popular culture these days. Turn on the news for Christ's sake. It doesn't exactly take a von Braun to connect problems with connecting with women to problems in the childhood relation to the mother. It's all in the air (p. 261).

So where do we stand with our reading now: is *Brief Interviews* a book of misogyny, or are there other more productive ways of viewing the book that may help us broaden the scope of criticism into Wallace's works? Throughout this thesis I suggest that a disruption of gender stereotypes and a prolonged engagement with gender discourse is evident in much of Wallace's *corpus*, and that by choosing to pay careful attention to the text such a broadening will occur. And in relation to the assertion in this thesis that Wallace's text critiques notions of rape culture, or allows for a critique of that culture, we must consider

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<sup>32</sup> And note once more the links, here, with the discussion of Orin and Avril, and of Freud's Oedipus complex in the previous chapter.

that the texts mentioned earlier (Franzen's, Selby Jr.'s, and Ellis', respectively) do not provide this level of interaction with rape culture, they merely use it as an instrument of entertainment that does little to challenge the *status quo*.

An attempt at reading Wallace's works is complicated by the sheer ambiguity of the texts. For example, a reading of gender of the opening *BI* stories may reveal something other than misogyny-by-default. For instance, 'A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life', short enough to quote in its entirety:

When they were introduced, he made a witticism, hoping to be liked. She laughed extremely hard, hoping to be liked. Then each drove home alone, staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces.

The man who'd introduced them didn't much like either of them, though he acted as if he did, anxious as he was to preserve good relations at all times. One never knew, after all, now did one now did one now did one (p. 0).

The title gives a rough indication of the period of time (1980s onwards) and location (Western consumer/service-industry society, most likely U.S.A.) in its use of 'postindustrial'. Postindustrial suggests leisure and 'free' time with its connotations of the service sector and consumerism. Theodor Adorno's 'Free Time' is a useful lens with which to view what is happening when he speaks of how 'people are unaware of how utterly unfree they are, even where they feel most at liberty, because the rule of such unfreedom has been abstracted from them'.<sup>33</sup> The binary terms of male/female, man/woman, and masculine/feminine, are so abstracted in cultural terms that unfreedom rules with respect to our lack of engagement with notions of gender. We seem hopelessly unaware of the fact that we perform our gender roles according to the rules of the ideology governing contemporary society.

Both 'he' and 'she' appear to be ill at ease judging by the way they behave in their desire to be liked. His witticism and her extremely hard laughter speak of unfreedom, where being oneself in certain social situations speaks of an ever present societal pressure to perform certain roles as dictated by culturally bound notions of gender: he *should* be funny, and she *should* show appreciation

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<sup>33</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Jay M. Bernstein, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Edited and with an Introduction by J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001, 2001), (p. 165).

of the fact, thereby the hierarchy of gender remains intact. Likewise, the man who introduces them operates out of a sense of preserving good relations at all times. The man's anxiety speaks of his unfreedom, along with the 'very same' twist to the faces of 'he' and 'she' as they drive home alone. The pain that each of the three nameless characters endures speaks of shared experience and has the effect of 'flattening out' gender differences and distinctions, especially when considering the sparse use of descriptive language throughout the short piece, and the over-riding feeling of shared human experience that attempts to connect them—but that ultimately fails due to their inability to be, or even to know themselves.

If the first short story can be read in this way the second story cannot, for it offers more resistance to a hypothesis of gender-flattening and requires another mode of thought. Zadie Smith's response to the story's protagonist is to suggest that Wallace annihilates him: 'God help the man who has chosen to worship himself!' (Smith, p. 292). The story presents a picture of the sedentary 'poet's poet' that is not at all flattering as he lounges in his 'unwet XL Speedo-brand swimsuit' (p. 1). Perhaps Smith's view of the poet is tainted by her industry's fascination with heaping seemingly never-ending adulation onto its decorated men writers, whilst their women counterparts receive barely a mention.<sup>34</sup> In the language of the narrative, there is little mention of the poet's physical features while there is much of those things that are ascribed to him by others:

The fifty-six-year-old American poet, a Nobel Laureate, a poet known in American literary circles as 'the poet's poet' or sometimes simply 'the Poet', lay outside on the deck, bare-chested, moderately overweight, in a partially reclined deck chair, in the sun, reading, half supine, moderately but not severely overweight, winner of two National Book Awards, a National Book Critics Circle Award, a Lamont Prize, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Prix de Rome, a Lannan Foundation Fellowship, a MacDowell Medal, and a Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a president emeritus of PEN, a poet

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<sup>34</sup> For example, read any 'Top 100 Novels of the 20th Century' list and it is more than likely that Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, Martin Amis, and Vladimir Nabokov will be represented by at least one work. It is unlikely that Iris Murdoch, Angela Carter, or Pat Barker's names will be on those same lists (and note the ratio of male-authored/female-authored).

two separate American generations have hailed as the voice of their generation... (p. 1)

In fact, close inspection of the language reveals very little about the actual physical being that is the poet, apart from his age, and his being moderately overweight, there is nothing else to speak of here. This description, along with the rest of the story, highlight the kind of society within which the poet exists—a society that lauds over its moderately overweight men of words, making him/them the absolute focus (and tool) by which to measure oneself—which is also the position that Sedgwick sets out in the 'Sabrina' talk. Wallace's engagement with gender discourse is made apparent in his unease of contemporary society, and the way in which it operates with a gender bias that privileges the man over the woman in this instance. Again, this alludes to a text that allows for a critique of the existing cultural apparatus rather than an acceptance of such norms because of the way the text engages with the society in which we operate.

In the collection's third story, 'Forever Overhead', it is significant that we meet the story's protagonist on his thirteenth birthday, as it marks, figuratively, his arrival in adolescence and liminality—not quite adult, yet no longer considered merely a child. There are obvious, physical changes to his body that have in fact been occurring for the past six months, significantly, the maturation of his reproductive organs. However, aside from differences of genitalia, the swimming pool location of the story provides an opportune moment with which to recognize the way language and ideology are used to reinforce the cultural norms that sustain the belief that men and women are markedly different from one another, and an opportunity to consider Wallace's engagement with gender discourse in an attempt at problematizing axiomatic thought.

For instance, the very same 'hard dangerous spirals of brittle black' armpit hair the boy sprouts will also sprout from the armpits of his sister and all other females as they reach a similar age (p. 4). Yet cultural etiquette, following the ideology of the day, requires women to rid themselves of such hair permanently, whether it is on their arms, legs, genitalia or face, so that they remain smooth and 'soft' next to their men counterparts, such as the boy's father who appears animal-like whilst laying 'on his big stomach, back like the

hint of a hump whale, shoulders curling with animal spirals' (p. 8). There is a hint of the frangible facade of gender 'difference' as the narrative voice (second person, therefore creating ambiguity as to the identity of the speaker) declares: 'you have grown into a new fragility' (p. 4). This fragility relates to the boy's 'sack [which] is now full and vulnerable, a commodity to be protected' (p. 4). This is a curious way to describe the boy's maturation and once more clouds the issues of gender hierarchy by making 'manhood' sound like something so fragile that it requires intervention in order to protect it. This mirrors the ways in which the aggressor/victim role is problematized during the rape and sexual violence narratives, and also the membrane-strengthening episode in *Broom*.

Less curious is the language used throughout the story to differentiate between men and women, boys and girls, yet undercutting the language is a sense that things are not so different after all. The girls playing in the pool with the boy's sister are described as 'shrill girls in bathing caps', whilst his sister's cap has 'raised rubber flowers... [with] limp old pink petals' (p. 5). Yet despite what appears to be just another stereotypical description of a group of girls in a swimming pool, the description of boys as 'all neck and legs and knobby joints, shallow-chested, vaguely birdlike', is not all that dissimilar to that of the girls who are playing with his sister: 'a group of thin girls from her grade' (pp. 5-6).<sup>35</sup> The differences tend to come when dealing with the onset of adulthood and beyond, and the 'girl-women, women, curved like instruments or fruit... [with] swells and swivels that melt in light into a surrounding space that cups and accommodates the soft curves as things precious' (p. 6). Viewing women's bodies as precious is an extension of the kind of thinking that holds women as objects. However, not all of the story's women are viewed in this way. Preciousness extends itself only to those who adhere to cultural doctrines of beauty, doctrines that over centuries morph women's bodies into the shapes that they are today.<sup>36</sup> Those women whose appearance differs from the

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<sup>35</sup> Birdlike, or rictal, is a repetitive symbol used throughout much of Wallace's corpus to describe men and women, boys and girls equally.

<sup>36</sup> Addeane S. Caellegh, *Too Close for Comfort: 500 Years of Corsets*, <http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/clothes/> (University of Virginia, 2007). Diet regimes and restrictive clothing are two such doctrines that have influenced and affected women's bone growth/inhibition and internal organ composition for over five hundred years in Western society.

standards laid down by said doctrines are open to ridicule, like the woman ahead of the boy on the ladder.

In her 'tight black nylon suit that is all in one piece', the reader is told that she 'should not wear a suit as tight as the suit she is wearing. She is as old as your mother, and as big. She is too big and too white' (pp. 8-9). This woman has not the bottom of the older girls, whose 'bottoms are in soft thin cloth, tight nylon stretch... [with] legs [that] make you think of deer' (p. 8). By contrast, this woman's legs 'have abrupt little squiggles of cold blue shattered vein under the white skin, as if something were broken, hurt, in her legs' (p. 9). Yet both the woman and the girls wear tight nylon fabric. It is this fabric that connects the woman to the girls, allowing us to question our assumptions, and to notice the societal apparatus used to influence us in our judgments. Yet we must also be clear that it is not only the woman who is mocked for her size, for his father is too with his 'big stomach, back like the hint of a whale'. By paying attention to the language, the arbitrariness of the rules that make up societally accepted norms are uncovered—norms that are rarely questioned because they appear so axiomatic.

## 6.5 The Detail of the Text

Following on from the opening stories, ambiguity abounds in the 'Brief Interviews' stories, which makes a reading of them somewhat challenging. For instance, 'BI #14' shows Q as some sort of sexual therapist judging by the protagonist's disclosure that he has developed an uncontrollable, unwanted and nonsensical habit of shouting out 'Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom' as he ejaculates during coitus. 'BI #15', takes place at the MCI-Bridgewater Observation and Assessment Facility;<sup>37</sup> which in fact appears to confirm Q's profession as having something to do with medical treatment of the

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<sup>37</sup> Anon., *Bridgewater State Hospital*, <https://www.mass.gov/locations/bridgewater-state-hospital> (2019). The facility is described as follows: Bridgewater State Hospital's mission is the establishment and maintenance of a safe, secure, and humane environment to all persons requiring specialized care and treatment. [...] All evaluations are conducted by highly trained and qualified psychiatrists and psychologists.



mind.<sup>38</sup> However, there is a marked difference between the protagonists we encounter in the first two stories and their relationship to the interlocutor known as Q. The protagonist of 'BI #14' is clueless about his own pathology with regard to the verbal utterances he emits during coitus: 'It wouldn't be so embarrassing if it wasn't so totally fucking weird. If I had any clue about what it was about. You know?' (p. 15). BI #14 appears to require the help of a psychologist/psychiatrist to help him to understand and overcome the problem of shouting 'Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom' during ejaculation. The only knowledge he admits to possessing about his condition comes from a doctor on a radio show who diagnoses it as 'coprolalia'.<sup>39</sup> It is also difficult to find much that can be considered as 'hideous' with regard to this protagonist, save for the lone example that betrays the attitude he has towards the women he sleeps with: 'I'll be doing it with some girl, it doesn't matter who' (p. 14). Such a remark is perhaps more flippant than hideous.

In contrast, the protagonist of 'BI #15' has a grasp of basic psychology/psychotherapy when he closes the interview with: 'But of course so now we can explain my proclivities and trace their origins and have everything tied up all nice and tight and tidy for you, can't we' (p. 16). Here, there is an issue with my use of 'he' as a personal pronoun. In fact, there are no references in the text that help to identify the protagonist as a man or woman. This speaks of societal conditioning when one considers how gender is assigned even without gender markers in the text. The title, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, affects our reading whether we wish it to or not, and there is actually no basis in using 'he' as a descriptor for this particular protagonist. Returning to BI #15's utterance, this is rhetorical and has an air of menace about it that is not present in 'BI #14'. The protagonist of 'BI #14' performs a patient-type role but BI #15 can occupy the role of patient *or* therapist, and unlike BI #14, the protagonist's words alert the reader to hideous possibilities: 'I mean, it's not as if I'm torturing them or burning them' (p. 15). The sentence suggests that BI #15 is in a position of authority, and may have access to subjects with which to experiment upon. The text of 'BI #15' offers little to substantiate Q's

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<sup>38</sup> Again, another link to appear in Wallace's text that hints of the practices of psychoanalysis, which also links with previous texts (see *Broom* and *IJ* chapters).

<sup>39</sup> A mis-diagnosis when defining coprolalia as 'obsessive or uncontrollable use of obscene language'.

relationship with the protagonist. The protagonist may be one of Q's deluded patients who just happen to have a reasonable grasp of medical language, but there is also the possibility that the protagonist is Q's colleague.<sup>40</sup> If a colleague, there exists the likelihood that the protagonist is superior to Q when considering the register the protagonist uses to converse with Q.

With respect to the next interview, 'BI #11' is curious given the fact that the two prior interviews appear to position Q as a medical professional/therapist. 'BI #11' sees Q in a relationship that is about to be ended by the protagonist, and seems more like a private conversation than an interview. BI #11 tries to convince Q that she would be better off without him and uses thirty-one questions during the relatively short text to try and coerce Q into adopting such a position, basically using language as a defence tool with which to stop Q from getting mad at him for wanting to leave her.<sup>41</sup> 'BI #11' shares similarities with 'BI #2' (appearing as the tenth interview) in that it also positions Q as being in a relationship with the protagonist, although it is not clear whether the protagonist here is the same person as in 'BI #11'. The initial ambiguity that the reader encounters serves to reinforce the notion that Q adopts multiple viewpoints depending on the situation. The fourth such 'interview', 'BI #3' is a transcript of an overheard conversation between two men in Trenton, NJ, known only as R and A. R appears to be the dominant of the two when he tells A to '[j]ust shut it for one fucking second', and as he constantly cuts A off mid-speech (p. 18). R tells A about picking up a 'girl' with 'incredible tits' who has just been jilted by her boyfriend. R lends an ear and listens to her tale of heartbreak, but his only motive is to have sex with her. Q is not actively involved in the conversation, nor is Q mentioned at any time, so we can say that this is not an interview. The implication is that Q overhears the conversation, but we do not know how these words are recorded and transcribed. We assume that it must have something to do with Q because Q has

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<sup>40</sup> *Titicut Follies*, Dir. Frederick Wiseman, 1967. There are similarities here with the film *Titicut Follies* and the figure of Vladimir, a patient at MCI-Bridgewater who is diagnosed as schizophrenic/paranoid. There are two lengthy debates that Vladimir conducts with the doctors/psychiatrists in charge of his health at MCI-Bridgewater. He discusses lucidly his mental state and the way the authorities refuse to listen to him and instead continue to incarcerate him with no hope of release. When listening to these debates it is possible to imagine that he is in fact better informed than the people charged with treating him, or at the very least that he is capable of problematizing the patient/doctor relationship.

<sup>41</sup> The questions used repeatedly are: Okay?; All right?; and Do you see?/Can you see that?

been involved in the 'interviews' so far, but it is yet another aspect of the story collection that speaks to the ambiguity at work amongst them.

The text alternates in its approach between uses of imagery brought about by descriptive syntax, and a lack of imagery found in stories where the syntax provides little in the way of description. The bulk of the text appears to be split in this way, but there are also occasions where the descriptive (visual) and the non-descriptive (verbal) combine in a single story, which happens most notably in 'Tri-Stan: I Sold Sissee Nar to Ecko'. A good example of the way the visual and verbal do not interact can be found in the 'Adult World' series (I) and (II). 'Adult World (I)' focuses heavily on visual aspects, and the first item to catch the reader's attention is the 'thingie' (penis) of the young woman's husband, followed soon after by a very descriptive retelling of an act of fellatio that occurs between the story's young, newly married couple, before moving on to describe the act of coitus in minute detail:

This nearly always made her feel somehow uneasy as she sat astride him, hunched and bobbing and with his hands on her hips and sometimes forgetting herself and grinding down with her pubic bone against his pubis [...]; and so the wife to her distress sometimes found herself preoccupied with worry even as they finished and she began to have another small aftershock of climax while grinding gently against him from below and searching his face for evidence of a truly genuine climax there and sometimes crying out in pleasure beneath him in a voice that sounded, she sometimes thought, less and less like her own (pp. 147-148).

One of the hallmarks of Wallace's writing is the (very) long sentence (three-hundred and seventy three words in the above, shortened example). Wallace positions the narrator so that the events are recalled for us with the wife's point of view as the central focus as she sits astride her husband's penis, until, that is, the husband assumes the 'Missionary Position of male dominance' (p. 148). This appears as a throwaway comment, but once more speaks to an engagement with gender discourse, where even private sexual activity between two consenting adults is governed by gender 'norms'. By being on top of her husband during coitus the husband's dominance is in question until he reassumes the (missionary) position of power, which, when we stop to think about such a thing, is a ridiculous notion.

Instead, it is sufficient to note the way in which the text positions the reader, enabling them to visualize the specific act of intimacy between the wife and her husband; which happens, in fact, because of the way the words are arranged so as to not 'get in the way' of proceedings. 'Adult World (II)', which is essentially a continuation of the story in 'Adult World (I)', need not have appeared as a separate piece altogether, or for that matter in a different format, stylistically speaking. Here, there is a shift to a format more akin to that of writer's notes:

PART: 4

FORMAT: SCHEMA

TITLE: ONE FLESH

'As blindingly sudden and dramatic as any question about any man's sexual imagination is going to appear, it was not the question itself which caused Jeni Roberts' epiphany and rapid maturation, but what she found herself gazing at as she asked it'.

--PT. 4 epigraph, in same stilted mode as 'Adult World (I)'

{☐ highlights format change from dramatic/stochastic to schematic/ordered}

1a. Question Jeni Roberts asks is whether Former Lover had indeed in their past relationship ever fantasized about other women during lovemaking w/ her (pp. 156-7).

The shift in form sees 'Adult World (II)' pick up the story from exactly the point where it left off at the end of 'Adult World (I)'. The abundance of imagery that accompanies 'AW(I)' is replaced with a more technical use of language that serves to remind the reader that this is a construction—made explicit to the reader by the constant interruption of narrative flow.

This move by Wallace highlights perfectly the self-consciousness that exists within the text. Much of *Brief Interviews* works in this way, using different approaches to exhibit an all-encompassing notion of the self-conscious, whether in the ways in which the characters appear ill at ease with language, or the ways in which they repeatedly attempt to clarify what it is they are saying—doing so, more often than not, by denying the implications that may stem from what they are actually saying. Another way in which this is made obvious is the occurrence of textual self-consciousness: curly brackets around the title on the title page; pagination beginning at page zero (an impossibility if we stop to think about it carefully); an opening story that in its entirety is composed of

seventy-nine words; a story about a MacArthur Foundation Fellow (the award that allowed for the writing of *Brief Interviews*); partial transcripts of brief interviews that do not always fit with such a description; the heavily stylized use of a dictionary entry as one of the collection's stories; in short, the way that Wallace includes a cross-section of cultural texts and a mixture of dialogue with which to make evident the constant presence of an other's gaze.

## 6.6 Conclusion to a reading of *Brief Interviews*

The difficulty of attempting a reading of such a complex text comes from knowing how to begin. In Wallace's use of the notion of the self-conscious, the text risks tempting judgment from the reader and may even risk indignation because of the provocative and disturbing elements within. It is shown that *Brief Interviews* is a text that questions, repeatedly, what it means to be aware, to be self-conscious, and that this always speaks to the positioning of an other, one who is always poised to cast a critical gaze to which we are inclined to respond—and the focus of this chapter, as with the previous chapters, is primarily concerned with gender and gender relations, and the fluidity of gender that forms due to the ambiguity inherent within.

*Brief Interviews* is performative in the manner in which it asks questions of those who choose to read it in its entirety. The text is not meant to be read and walked away from—if that were the case then 'Adult World (I)' would suffice and 'Adult World (II)' would not be required. The text is aware of the presence of an 'other', and actively presents us with different positions from which to think this through. Once more, Judith Butler's work is critical to this enquiry, as a means of discussing Wallace's language as 'performative' in its use throughout *Brief Interviews*:

Language is not an *exterior medium or instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self. The Hegelian model of self-recognition that has been appropriated by Marx, Lukacs, and a variety of contemporary liberatory discourses presupposes a potential adequation between the 'I' that confronts its world, including its language, as an object, and the 'I' that finds itself as an object in that world [...] What discursive tradition establishes the 'I' and its 'Other' in an

epistemological confrontation that subsequently decides where and how questions of knowability and agency are to be determined? (Butler, pp. 143-4).

Butler writes this in the conclusion to *Gender Trouble*, an exemplary work borne out of feminist and queer politics, and her words align with what Wallace's text achieves in its hyper-awareness of the self-conscious. The move that Butler makes to open up the space between the 'I' and the 'Other' in order to question the apparatus that is held in place in order for us to view such a binary as 'real', makes it possible to view Wallace's text as performing a similar feat. To consider this as a viable option, note the way Butler goes on to discuss that:

As part of the epistemological inheritance of contemporary political discourses of identity, this binary opposition is a strategic move within a given set of signifying practices, one that establishes the 'I' in and through this opposition and which reifies that opposition as a necessity, concealing the discursive apparatus by which the binary itself is constituted. The shift from an *epistemological* account of identity to one which locates the problematic within practices of *signification* permits an analysis that takes the epistemological mode itself as one possible and contingent signifying process. [...] However, the substantive 'I' only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalize its effects (Butler, p. 144).

Butler's theory provides a fresh way of thinking about Wallace's work, in that the way in which he structures *Brief Interviews* is as a repetitive text that ceaselessly exposes the gap between the construction of the 'I' and the 'Other', what we thus far consider as the 'self-consciousness' of the text. However, Wallace differs from Butler where identity politics is concerned; in fact, it seems safe to say that his intention was not, like Butler, to make such a move in order to seek 'the loss of gender norms' (Butler, p. 146). Rather, Wallace is content to explore such gender norms, and in doing so exposes the structures that holds such 'norms' in place, which allows for a critique of the very culture that accepts this way of being. Where Wallace and Butler converge is in their shared interest in providing us with more questions with which to ask, to probe, and to consider fully the ways in which society operates with respect to our interactions with one another. Butler writes the following, but when we

consider the interest that Wallace shows in his engagement with gender discourse, one can imagine these as Wallace's words:

What, then, enables the exposure of the rift between the phantasmatic and the real whereby the real admits itself as phantasmatic? Does this offer the possibility for a repetition that is not fully constrained by the injunction to reconsolidate naturalized identities? Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself (Butler, p. 146).

*Brief Interviews* positions the 'I' and its 'Other' precisely in order that we question our own 'knowability'. The conventional model of the 'nuclear' family is viewed throughout the text as uncomfortable and unstable, as is the case throughout Wallace's *oeuvre*, where gender relations are ever dependent on language in order to create a form of stability that is forcibly shaken when we tamper with language. As readers, we are meant to distinguish between what is and is not gendered vocabulary because Wallace does not provide us with the necessary tools to be certain. The enacting of gender within the stories is shown to be linked to the deployment of vocabulary and syntax, and this is the reason why this reading of *Brief Interviews* takes up a more nuanced position in that it views the work as an example of Wallace's continuing engagement with gender discourse, particularly around notions of gender relations, as is the case throughout this thesis.

In ending the collection with, 'Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XXIV)', the first-person perspective of a child is most telling. The domesticity of a nuclear-family household is the setting in which the child learns how to perform gender through the actions and performances of a mother and a father. The mother is the active parent, cutting the child's hair as a twin sibling watches and mimics the child's facial expressions. The mother's domain is the kitchen, a site of multi-tasking (cooking, and cutting her child's hair). The father is distant from these activities as he lounges in the sitting room, and as he is engrossed in tuning the household radio for better reception. In a similar manner to that of 'BI #15', the narrative gives no positive indication of the speaker's gender, we are only told of the brother who teases mercilessly as the child is restrained by the mother whilst receiving a haircut. It is tempting

to assume that the child is a boy because of the actions of the brother who is said to be mirroring each and every facial expression of the child narrator, but to recognize this is to realize the ways in which we habitually classify experiences according to certain markers. Wallace's text highlights the porousness of gender borders in this instance, which mirrors his engagement with gender discourse throughout his *corpus*.

The stories are often not actual stories, but are merely *about* stories. In a sense their fragmentary nature makes a comment on their presentation of ruptures, and failures, etc. By disrupting conventional notions of gender, Wallace's text provides for us a template with which to question every-day, mundane gender practices that are housed firmly in the heterosexual matrix. This differs somewhat from Butler and her contemporaries in that Wallace is not doing so in order to uncover 'alternative cultural configurations of gender', but rather to allow for a more fluid use of gender within the existing heterosexual framework (Butler, p. 147). Such fluidity serves to break down prevalent cultural notions of gender that invariably centre around binary thinking (active/passive, aggressor/victim, dominant gaze/receptive gaze, for example), and thus is useful in destabilizing gender norms from within the realm of heteronormative practice, a site that may have greater influence on the wider public, and its perceptions of gender norms, than that of a feminist-based politics of gender. With that in mind, a further section considers aspects of some of Wallace's later fiction: Wallace's posthumously published, *The Pale King*, and the short story collection, *Oblivion*.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, this reaffirms the need for more nuanced readings of Wallace's work in relation to issues of gender, and the performativity of gender.

## 6.7 The Later Fiction

A continuation of the idea that the heterosexual matrix is shown as unhealthy and undesirable throughout Wallace's works, warped as it is through its insistence on maintaining rigid distinctions around gender (and that Wallace's

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<sup>42</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (London: Penguin UK, 2011); David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion: Stories* (London: Hachette, 2004).



texts do much to problematize), is seen in the title story of the collection of stories, *Oblivion*, as well as in *The Pale King*. Remembering that in *Brief Interviews* this thesis argues that the heterosexual matrix is portrayed in a damning way, where gender relations have reached the pinnacle of cruelty, self-obsession, and violence, it is no surprise then to find these same elements in Wallace's later fiction when David Hering points out that 'Wallace's publication' of *BI* 'marks the end of the first stage of composition of the third novel'.<sup>43</sup> Hering's research at the Wallace archive suggests that Wallace's quest to write another novel following *Infinite Jest* results in these other works being published. 'Oblivion' utilizes the 'hideous' man trope by hinting that the 'adoptive father' exhibits incestuous behaviour around his stepdaughter, resulting in her moving away to a college far from the family home—though the narrator places the blame on his wife for feeling unsettled at her 'nubile' daughter's 'blossoming' (Wallace, *Oblivion*, pp. 193, 218). Furthermore, in a discussion of the latter stages of the story Charles Nixon states that the narrative 're-establish[es] the echoes of domestic sexual abuse that have been present throughout', supporting my claim that there is a continuation of the abuse seen in *BI*, and that this confirms a negative portrayal of the heterosexual matrix.<sup>44</sup> Equally, there is also what appears to be the collapse of gender expression in the closing moments of the story, as it 'presents an extreme vision of the concept of language appropriation', and as Randall (often called Randy by his stepdaughter, Audrey) and Hope collapse 'into each other' in what Hayes-Brady describes as the reversal of the 'gender dynamic' in 'BI #20' (Hayes-Brady, *Failures*, p. 146). At this late stage of Wallace's writing career his texts are still attempting to break down barriers of gender by highlighting the very worst aspects of the heterosexual matrix.

This is also seen in *The Pale King*, where the narrative around Toni Ware and the abuse she encounters as a child maintains focus on the negativity of the heterosexual matrix. Jorge Araya makes the case that the 'descriptions of Toni Ware's childhood in a trailer park' reflects Wallace making 'a sincere effort to engage with [...] the more pressing issue at stake', which Araya suggests is

<sup>43</sup> David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), p. 129.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Nixon, 'Attention, Retention, and Extension in Oblivion: Stories', *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace* (Ipswich: Salem Press, 2015), 176-91, (p. 177).

primarily economic.<sup>45</sup> Though economic factors do influence the trajectory of Toni Ware's life it is the level of violence that she both witnesses and receives that also extend into issues of gender, precisely because of the toxic state of gender relations on display. Hering's archival work unearths the fact that 'the basis of Toni Ware's story in section 8' was '[w]ritten initially as part of *Sir John Feelgood*', while also 'chim[ing] thematically' with the *BI* collection, and was 'listed for inclusion in *Oblivion* and then subsequently rewritten' for *TPK* (Hering, *Fiction*, p. 128). Hayes-Brady continues from previous works by stating that in *TPK* 'the subjectivity of the masculine characters is emphasized, while the objectivity of the feminine is also highlighted' (Hayes-Brady, *Failures*, p. 185). Certainly, the opening to Section Eight is ominous in its talk of an errant husband who returns to his family only to slaughter them, and in its description of an explosion which ruptures a 'trailer's south wall in a great labial tear', the language of which is both aggressive and sexually explicit in its use of metaphor (Wallace, *TPK*, p. 53). The text continues with stories from Toni's childhood, where, though not explicit, they relay instances of sexual abuse, and coercion. However, Toni's response to such abuse is not stereotypically gendered. Her 'inner life' is described as 'rich and multivalent', while in her 'fantasies of romance' it is 'she who fought and overcame thereon to rescue some object or figure' (Wallace, *TPK*, p. 55). Indeed, soon after come descriptions of Toni enacting violent revenge on the men and boys who abuse her: cutting brake lines; combining powdered glass into sandwich meat; and placing asbestos strips into a tumble dryer—the text implies that all such acts result in fatalities, and so the question of subjectivity and objectivity around Toni Ware is problematized precisely because Toni fights against the abuse that is inflicted on her (Wallace, *TPK*, pp. 57-9). Toni Ware prevails in spite of the horrendous experience of being present at her mother's murder, she lives alone except for her two dogs (very Wallace-like), and works for the IRS—the final scene of Toni's involvement in the novel lacks the context to fully understand the storyline, yet she is written with a steely-efficiency, is emotionally in control,

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<sup>45</sup> Jorge Araya, 'Why the Whiteness? Race in *The Pale King*', *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace* (Massachusetts: Grove Publishing, 2015), 238-51, (p. 249).

and 'concerned entirely with whether the object could be affected', which places her firmly in the position of subject (Wallace, *TPK*, p. 511).<sup>46</sup>

Meredith Rand is equally challenging to 'norms' of gender when thinking about her character in terms of subjectivity and objectivity. She is described as 'totally, wrist-bitingly attractive', and yet her beauty (like that of Joelle, from *I*) is not the only aspect that defines her (Wallace, *TPK*, p. 447). Hering notes the way in which Meredith dominates the conversation (with fellow IRS officer, Shane Drinion), though recounts this as one of the novel's 'scenarios of failed communication', due to the manner in which Meredith uses the 'dialogic partner' in order to talk about herself (Hering, *Fiction*, pp. 141, 160). A positive critique of Meredith's dialogue is seen in Emily Hogg's article, in which Rand's 'self-focus becomes not the barrier to a more responsible civics but the beginning of a healthier way of being'.<sup>47</sup> Meredith's moment of epiphany while institutionalized in a mental health facility arises from conversations with an orderly, later her husband, Ed Rand. Jackson takes a more negative view of Meredith's character, concluding that is only through Ed's 'manipulative seduction' that she becomes empowered but 'in ways that, cruelly, render her more subject to his control' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 193). Jackson's view of Meredith seems to take no account of the fact that she is aware that Ed's 'analysis' of her mental health state is actually a way of Ed 'talking about himself', which circles back to Hering's view of the dialogue in this section as 'tending towards the monologic' (Hering, *Fiction*, pp. 141, 160). This thesis argues that Meredith Rand is yet another example of a female character in Wallace's fiction that deserves more critical engagement in order to fend off surface-level critiques, like that of Jackson, who continues with 'Rand's double bind – wanting to be saved by a man, but being aware of the anti-feminist implications of this same desire – means she exemplifies the kind of postfeminist woman the misogynists E and K hypothesize' in 'BI #28' (Jackson, *Toxic*, p. 193). There is a key moment in Meredith's dialogue where she recalls Ed's hypothesis on how immaturity manifests in young women and girls (and feelings of wanting to be saved), but

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<sup>46</sup> For further thoughts on Toni Ware's considerable attributes as a character, see Matt Bucher, 'The Pale King's Trailer Park Queen', *Medium.com*, (2015) <<https://medium.com/@mattbucher/the-pale-king-s-trailer-park-queen-1a070aa7142f>> [Accessed 19 September 2021].

<sup>47</sup> Emily J. Hogg, 'Subjective Politics in the Pale King', *English Studies*, 95 (2014), 59-69, (p. 62).

then he goes on to say that ‘in men it’s somewhat different in how it looks but really it’s all the same, which is wanting to be distracted from what you’ve lost and fixed and saved by somebody’ (Wallace, *TPK*, p. 498). Ed’s talk, and Meredith’s retelling, is another example of the collapse of gender expression in Wallace’s texts—where everyone is viewed as wanting to be saved (not just young women and girls, but young men and boys also), so for Jackson to be so dismissive of Meredith, but not Ed or Drinion, seems in itself like an echo of misogyny that is unconsciously internalized, and does little to further more nuanced conversations around Wallace’s written women that this thesis suggests are productive in terms of exposing the perniciousness of the heterosexual matrix as the guardian of gender ‘norms’.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The thesis begins with a discussion of the context for considering Wallace's works as exhibiting a concern with gender discourse, arising from the arrival of Eve Sedgwick at Amherst and her infamous 'Sabrina' talk.<sup>1</sup> Following Sedgwick's impact upon Wallace, it is specifically those elements throughout Wallace's *corpus* that highlight the dysfunctionality of the heterosexual matrix and disrupt axioms of gender that are central to this thesis. Alongside this, Judith Butler's works act as tools with which a nuanced discussion of Wallace's works develops, and which help to illuminate aspects of the texts. Chapter Two notes the emphasis placed upon language use in gender relations, while Wallace's choice to begin both his debut novel and his short story collection with controversial topics (campus rape and sexual abuse, respectively) is most telling, and differs from his contemporaries in that Wallace's texts provide the tools for challenging rape culture thinking. The language used around Lenore Beadsman's narrative constantly signals to the reader of his/her/their own place within a language system, which emphasizes the prevalence of gender performativity as axiomatic in the larger cultural setting. Equally, the blend of masculinity and femininity, which speaks to a sense of gender hybridity, problematizes axiomatic notions of gender and of gender discourse. Lenore acts as a filter of cultural narrative, as Wallace takes on the role of social

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<sup>1</sup> Eve K. Sedgwick, 'Sabrina Doesn't Live here Anymore', *Amherst*, 37 (Spring 1985), 12-21.

commentator, and takes aim at the very dysfunctionality of the heterosexual matrix—which is similar to how Faye and Julie’s characters operate in ‘Little Expressionless Animals’.

Chapters Three and Four elaborate further upon Wallace’s preoccupation with the language around gender and gender discourse, and also note its influence on the fictional works that follow. The section on Wallace’s personal copy of Biskind’s text demonstrates the levels of attention that Wallace affords issues of gender, and again, of how this informs the fiction that follows. Wallace’s non-fiction exhibits a fascination with understanding the hypocrisy of culturally informed notions of gender, while also serving to destabilize the heterosexual matrix. In Chapter Five, Wallace’s engagement with gender discourse and the performativity of gender becomes more nuanced, particularly in those moments where notions of gender are destabilized. By allowing for non-conventional readings of gender, around gender hybridity for example, the text disrupts implicit ‘norms’ of gender—Wallace’s text problematizes gender via its focus on the repetitions and codes that make attributes of gender seem axiomatic to an unquestioning population. The major women of *Infinite Jest* are also placed under the spotlight for a detailed look at how Wallace writes woman, and the way in which he furthers the notion of the hybridity of gender. Butler’s thoughts of gender as ‘the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized’, but also ‘the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized’ fits with Wallace’s project, as his text produces anomalies that are not easily explained (Butler, ‘Regulations’, p. 42).

In Chapter Six, Wallace’s use of language continues to highlight the dysfunctionality of the heterosexual matrix. Equally, the themes of rape and sexual violence that are present throughout Wallace’s *oeuvre* confirm the trajectory of his engagement with gender discourse, as originally shown in his debut novel, *Broom*, and in his short story collection, *Girl*, and that originates from Eve Sedgwick’s arrival at Amherst. Wallace’s fascination with language use comes to the fore as it is the technical elements of language that serve to disrupt gender norms and practices—where gender is viewed as performative through the lens of language. Wallace’s *BI*, along with the later fiction of *Oblivion* and *The*

*Pale King*, provide a template with which to question every-day, mundane gender practices that are housed firmly in the heterosexual matrix, and in this respect his works are unique in that the challenge is offered from within this base.

When Butler states that '[t]he conflation of gender with masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female, thus performs the very naturalization that the notion of gender is meant to forestall', the possibilities for reading Wallace's texts in ever more nuanced ways are expanded greatly (Butler, 'Regulations', p. 43). This thesis continues from the existing work on gender in Wallace studies, and points to new opportunities with which to dismantle old, axiomatic notions of gender. And when texts from within the heterosexual matrix are shown as capable of doing so, where portrayals of gender do not readily fit with 'norms' of masculinity and femininity, and where gender expression starts to collapse into itself, these may well become the sites where the apparatus of gender is denaturalized once and for all.

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