Past Tense, Present Perfect, Future Even Better: Positive Thinking in Contemporary American Literature

Evan Lower

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University of York

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Abstract

This thesis explores American literature of the last 25 years that has staged a debate with positive thinking—a century-old American self-help discipline—and the symbiotic relationship it has formed with neoliberal capitalism. In my introduction, I will connect positive thinking, along with its contemporary institutionalized form within positive psychology, to theories of neoliberal governmentality. I will be using the various short stories, novels, and poetry in this thesis to discover the multivalent implications, connotations, and applications of positive thinking as a term and a practice. The first chapter of my thesis focuses on the representation of collective positive thinking in precarious workplaces. I will be looking at how novels by Joshua Ferris, Ed Park, and Helen DeWitt engage with positive thinking's distinct individualizing nature and the latent possibility that exists within collective narration. In the second chapter, I will be using the existential elements of the first chapter as a springboard to explore in greater detail the relationship between neoliberal positive thinking and the body, mortality, and waste in works by Dave Eggers, Richard Powers, and Claudia Rankine. My third chapter addresses the scientific reduction of individuals within the life sciences: specifically genetic and cognitive sciences. I will use texts by Jonathan Franzen, George Saunders, and Powers to examine the manner in which contemporary neuroscientific discourse is wrapped up with neoliberal concerns and functions similarly in effect to the more straightforward positive thinking that I discuss in the previous chapters. My final chapter focuses on positive thinking's repressed element, negative thinking. In this chapter I will study a short story by Saunders as well as novels by Rachel Kushner and Colson Whitehead to understand the modes of negativity available to individuals and literature itself.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

In a 2000 interview with Michael Silverblatt of *Bookworm,* American fiction writer George Saunders said, "I think that there's a lot of positive thinking lies that are in the air, and the effect of those things is to tell people who are in pain that they're not, or that if they are in pain they caused it" (Silverblatt). What Saunders suggests in this short, and seemingly simple, statement is deceptively complex and multifaceted. The "positive thinking" that Saunders refers to here can be thought of in two ways: for some it is a natural impulse to see the good in life, characterized by optimism and a general disposition toward the world that sees it as a place for flourishing and possibility; for others positive thinking is the purposeful endeavor to correct away negative thoughts—be they evaluations of objects, circumstances, or events in everyday life—in favor of corresponding positive thoughts. It is exemplified in the decisive reevaluation of a glass half-empty as one that is half-full. This effort is generally committed in pursuit of happiness, or success, or both. Saunders suggests, however, that positive thinking is not simply a pursuit kickstarted by the will of the individual, but rather that there is an entity or entities that constitute a sort of coalition of positive thinking, entities that disseminate "lies." Those entities, this thesis suggests, are modern-day experts of the mind both amateur—in the case of self-help gurus—and professional—in the case of practitioners within what Nikolas Rose refers to as the "psy disciplines" (*Inventing Our Selves* 11). There has been in the past two decades a major growth in what William Davies calls "the happiness industry," an industry that comprises self-help literature, motivational speakers, neuropsychologists, behavioral economists, positive psychologists, marketers, mega-corporations, and others.

According to Saunders, the entities that make up the positive thinking coalition tell two distinct but connected lies. The first is that people are not actually in pain when they say they are. If we think of positive thinking as the intentional correction of negative thoughts into positive thoughts, then positive thinking suggests that the individual is not actually in pain because all experience is not objective but rather subjective. The quality of experience is decided by perception rather than an objective barometer. In this situation, "pain" is a subjective qualification of a subjectively determined "negative" experience. Therefore one is never actually in pain but rather experiencing something that is subject to the possibility of being perceived either negatively as pain or positively as gain, as in the bromide, "Pain is gain!" Saunders's second, connected lie is the positive thinking belief that those in pain are responsible for that pain. This lie derives from the origins of American positive thinking: the late-19th-century mind-cure religion, New Thought. New Thought positive thinking derived from a philosophical idealism which held that material realities are the manifestations of metaphysical processes. In this philosophy, states of mind attract similar material outcomes, which means that those in pain must by necessity have a pain-oriented worldview. What this doctrine, known popularly as the "law of attraction," entails is both that those who are considerably more successful or materially wealthier than others must have positive outlooks and that those for whom life is difficult and material wealth elusive must necessarily have negative outlooks. What is troubling about these lies is that they are popularly held as truths in 21st-century American culture, enough so that Saunders has dedicated much of his oeuvre to trying to challenge them. In the 21st century, positive thinking has been embraced professionally by the now-established psychological discipline, positive psychology, founded in 1998 by Martin Seligman. Under positive psychology, Saunders's "lies" have reached the level of dubious scientific fact. Not only are

mental states subject even more to subjective determination, but with positive psychology's so-called "science of happiness," the individual's responsibility for his or her own well-being in a period of scientifically determinable happiness has reached the point of institutionalized victim-blaming.

The victim-blaming I describe here is not unique to positive psychology. It is in fact a major dynamic within the contemporary form of global capitalism, neoliberalism. Within criticism of neoliberalism, the unique form of victim-blaming described above has been given the name "responsibilization." Responsibilization describes the process by which individuals are handed over the responsibility for things previously within the purview of the state. As Ronen Shamir describes it, "governance […] relies on predisposing social actors to assume responsibility for their actions" (7). Enlisted as self-entrepreneurs under neoliberalism, individuals are stripped bare of those rights and "entitlements" previously guaranteed to them in the Fordist model of capitalism that neoliberalism replaced. Once the state no longer assumes responsibility for the individual's livelihood, the failure of that individual to succeed or even make a living is looked upon as a failure of the individual rather than society, much less the state itself. It is within the context of neoliberalism and responsibilization that positive thinking discourses have differentiated themselves from their previous forms. A particularly extreme example of the limits of responsibilization within positive thinking rhetoric is a quote from one of the self-help discipline's principle contemporary writers. In *The Secret* (2006), Rhonda Byrne writes about victims of natural disasters and genocide, "By the law of attraction, they [the victims] had to be on the same frequency as the event" (quoted in Cederström and Spicer, 81). The effort to responsibilize is within neoliberal doctrine an effort not only to withdraw the state from individual matters but to entirely depoliticize that which was once strictly within the realm

of political concerns. Byrne, for example, directly confronts one of the most significant byproducts of decades of neoliberal economic policies—exploding wealth inequalities—in her book. Before the Occupy Wall Street movement brought the public's attention to "the 99 percent" in 2011, Byrne rhetorically asks in *The Secret*, "Why do you think that 1 percent of the population earns around 96 percent of all the money that's being earned," answering with the unexpected reply, "People who have drawn wealth into their lives used The Secret, whether consciously or unconsciously" (6). It has been argued that neoliberal policies have been most effectively established in times of cultural and economic crisis, and it is my view that positive thinking has been—at least in the United States—incredibly helpful in naturalizing the core principles of neoliberal rhetoric.[1]

Highlighting the conjunction of crisis and positive thinking discourse will be one of my principle aims in this thesis. As several scholars have already shown, positive thinking as a self-help industry has been most successful over the last 40 years not only around times of momentous economic and cultural changes but specifically *within* communities of disillusionment and disinvestment. The self-help industry's boom in the 1980s not only coincides with the historical normalization of corporate downsizing; positive thinking texts and motivational posters and coaches were specifically sold to precarious workplaces as a means of boosting morale. Nearly all the literature I feature in my thesis foregrounds the insinuation of positive thinking within moments of crisis. Whether it is in a time of personal crisis—such as the onset of cancer, the destruction of a marriage, sudden mass media attention—or cultural crisis—the precarization of stable employment, the destruction and mistreatment of black Americans, the onset of a zombie apocalypse—much of the most significant American literature of the last 25

[1] For arguments on neoliberalism's policy gains within crises, see Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) and Philip Mirowski's *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* (2013).

years has attempted to confront American optimism and its structuring discourse, positive thinking. Saunders's first collection of stories, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* (1996), represents the first concerted effort in contemporary American literature to grapple seriously with positive thinking in its neoliberal form, and though I will not focus specifically on any of the stories contained therein, that collection represents the periodizing anchor for my thesis. Literature is a particularly fruitful site for exploring positive thinking not only because literature tends to represent the historical specificities of its time but also because literature is uniquely capable of representing what citation of dates and figures and direct quotation from self-help books cannot: that is, fiction can convey the *experience* of positive thinking, the approximation of the process of cognitively changing one's negative thoughts into positive ones, a process that is both subjective and distinctly linguistic.

In the sections that follow, I will provide concise histories of the three most important fields in my thesis: positive thinking, positive psychology, and neoliberalism. I will show how positive thinking began as a quasi-religious movement in the United States in the 19th century, how it took off as a self-help movement in the early-20th century, and how it merged with neoliberalism around the turn-of-the-21st century to become the largest self-help discipline. I will also tell a brief story of positive psychology's history and how it fits within the larger history of the psychological discipline. There has developed a growing field of research dedicated to investigating the entanglement of the happiness industry—particularly positive thinking and positive psychology—and global capitalism, and I will outline the arguments of the key figures in this field. Barbara Ehrenreich was one of the first writers to provide a concise description of this historical phenomenon, illustrating in *Smile or Die* (2009) the process by which an obscure, pseudoscientific religious movement developed into the multi-billion-dollar industry that

positive thinking is today. Carl Cederström and André Spicer include positive psychology and positive thinking in their 2015 study of a "wellness syndrome" in contemporary Western culture. Sam Binkley argues in *Happiness as Enterprise* (2014) from the Foucauldian standpoint that the happiness industry has worked in tandem with neoliberal subject-making to radically transfigure our relationship to our subjectivity and happiness. I will use these scholars' insights to make direct connections between neoliberalism, positive thinking, and positive psychology, bringing out how interconnected these discourses have become, before introducing the literature I intend to study to illuminate these connections. I will end this introduction by situating my research within the broader field of literary studies, namely in relation to the contemporary field of affect theory, to which my research owes much of its theoretical foundation.

The Humble Origins of American Positivity: New Thought, Mind Cure, and Self Help

The founding father of the New Thought movement was Phineas P. Quimby (1802-1866), a New England clock-maker and mesmerist who developed as an extension of—and departure from—his mesmerist work a philosophy of disease whereby sickness was considered a manifestation of "wrong belief" (Jenkins 68). Quimby began his lifetime interest in the mind in 1838 as a practitioner of mesmerism, a healing technique developed by Franz Anton Mesmer in the 1770s—and disseminated in the United States by Charles Poyen in 1836 (Haller 35). Mesmer's healing methods involved using magnets that would induce in patients convulsions and, in some cases, miraculous recovery (25). Quimby eventually experimented with mesmerism by pretending to hold magnets or even falsely claiming that the water in bathtubs—in which patients would be submerged—had been previously magnetized. When he found that the efficacy of this approach matched that which proceeded from the mesmerist technique, Quimby concluded that

the illnesses his patients were trying to have cured existed only in their minds, for which Quimby blamed medical doctors who, he claimed, diagnosed fake illnesses only to prescribe more treatments: “It was the doctor’s belief that made the disease and, deceived by its supposed ‘truth,’ the patient acquired the effects” (49-50). The diseases had been acquired mentally in the patients, but according to Quimby they had no physical truth, so the key to curing the disease was a mental rather than a physical process. Beginning in 1847, Quimby set to developing his theories on mind cures, what he would go on to call the “Science of Health” (quoted in Haller 51).

According to this metaphysical relation of thought to matter, reality was subservient to thought, and as such could be altered through spiritual enlightenment. New Thought makes an appearance in William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) within the section on religions of healthy-mindedness. James describes New Thought, which he alternatively names the “Mind-cure movement,” as a religion based on a “belief in the all-saving power of healthy-minded attitudes as such, in the conquering efficacy of courage, hope, and trust, and a correlative contempt for doubt, fear, worry, and all nervously precautionary states of mind” (76, 77). In following passages, James exalts the perceived successes of New Thought mind cures and the positive change this new philosophy effected in the American spirit (77-78). James’s endorsement of New Thought’s principle aims would lend much-needed credibility to the discipline of positive thinking and establish it within mainstream American culture. Quimby published very few of his many writings during his lifetime. It would not be until almost 60 years after his death that Horatio W. Dresser would collect Quimby’s papers and publish them in a volume, *The Quimby Manuscripts* (1921). Instead, Quimby’s theories lived on largely through the subsequent instruction from his pupils, most notably Mary Baker Eddy.

Though Quimby is thought of, according to Ehrenreich, as the "grandfather of today's positive thinking" (85), it is the work of Quimby's protégé, Eddy, that really set off New Thought's considerable success in the late 19th century and especially its lasting power into the 20th century. Eddy, a patient of Quimby's, founded Christian Science in 1879, a few years after the publication of her book, *Science and Health* (1875), which was given and maintains scriptural status in the religion (Jenkins 68).[2] Though seemingly similar in their teachings, Philip Jenkins identifies the philosophical difference between New Thought and Christian Science. While New Thought taught the malleability of matter through mental processes, Christian Science was pure metaphysics, a Berkeleyan idealism whereby mind was all, and matter was an illusion (Jenkins 69). Whereas New Thought seeks to heal through mind tricks, "Christian Science holds that in the absolute sense man is spiritual and therefore cannot be sick" (Wilson 123). Healing, then, means continuous prayer toward the end of knowing and internalizing the "Truth of Science," which is that sickness is an illusion, and all is mind (123). Perhaps due to its immense popularity, Christian Science and its charismatic leader, Eddy, received widespread popular criticism from figures including Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, and Stefan Zweig.[3] Despite such criticism, however, Christian Science would reach membership numbers "in the hundreds of thousands" by the 1920s (Jenkins 60).

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[2] There is an extensive historical debate about the possibility that Eddy plagiarized Quimby's work in her own writings, but the evidence on both sides is far too elaborate to try to summarize here. Most telling in the story of Eddy's debt to Quimby is her reference to her relationship with him as his pupil in early letters and most notably a poem she wrote for him upon his death, only to years later, after Christian Science had surpassed other New Thought sects in popularity, claim that it was she who taught him (Wilson 135). Martin Gardner, in his 1993 book, *The Healing Revelations of Mary Baker Eddy*, offers a comparative analysis of various texts Eddy allegedly plagiarized. Bryan R. Wilson gives a good summary of the evidence on both sides in *Sects and Society*.

[3] See Twain's nonfiction book on the religion, *Christian Science* (1907), where—interestingly—Twain's criticism is directed more at the supposedly authoritarian leader rather than the claim that the mind can exert control over matter (Twain 34). See also Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920) and *Elmer Gantry* (1927). Lastly, see Zweig's *Mental Healers*, translated into English in 1932 but originally published in German in 1931 under the title *Die Hielung durch den Geist*: in it Zweig gives biographies of Franz Mesmer, Sigmund Freud, and Mary Baker Eddy.

If Quimby's intentions for New Thought were pure in their primary interest in healing patients, the leading writers of New Thought after his death quickly turned it into a "get-rich-quick" scheme (Griswold, quoted in Wilson 133). What used to be mostly a mind-cure movement, according to Haller, "conflated those same images of spirit and matter into an unapologetic system of high-powered personal magnetism for exalting material success" (13). A popular New Thought figure, Ralph Waldo Trine, writes in his 1897 book *In Tune with the Infinite* about the "law of prosperity," alternatively referred to as the "law of attraction": "He who lives in the realization of his oneness with this Infinite Power becomes a magnet to attract himself a continual supply of whatsoever things he desires" (176).[4] In the late 1920s, Frank B. Robinson founded Psychiana, alternatively named the New Scientific Religion, which twisted New Thought mind cure philosophies to promise "health, wealth, and happiness" (Jenkins 115). Jenkins writes that prayer under Psychiana "consisted of visualizing those things the believer sought in such a way that they would actually come true" (115). The potentials this promised for workers of the booming industrial workplace of the 1920s—let alone the captains of industry—meant that New Thought had lasting power as a philosophy.

New Thought survived into the 20th century largely due to this message of lasting fulfillment and wealth, losing its competition with medical science for healing patients.[5] Some of the most famous early self-help writers drew from New Thought philosophy in their books. Napoleon Hill writes in his hugely popular 1937 book, *Think and Grow Rich!*, that "[t]houghts are things" (16) and "ALL IMPULSES OF THOUGHT HAVE A TENDENCY TO CLOTHE

[4] The distribution of positive thinking materials in the workplace began quite early. Anne Harrington reports that "Henry Ford was so persuaded of the power of New Thought to facilitate worldly success that he ordered bulk copies of Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite*" (118).

[5] Ehrenreich speculates that New Thought's decline in popularity as a method for curing disease arose as the germ theory of disease began to see widespread popularity within medical science (88).

THEMSELVES IN THEIR PHYSICAL EQUIVALENT" (53). Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, however, is the text that would most famously come to characterize the American ethos of positive thinking through the New Thought tradition. In it, Peale echoes Trine's law of attraction in his first "simple, workable rule": "Formulate and stamp indelibly on your mind a mental picture of yourself as succeeding. Hold this picture tenaciously. Never permit it to fade. Your mind will seek to develop this picture" (28). Positive thinking would see, along with the self-help industry at large, a steady increase in revenue over the course of the 20th century.

Ehrenreich tells a troubling story in *Smile or Die* about the historical connection between downsizing corporate offices in the 1980s and the related boom in the self-help industry during that decade. Ehrenreich writes of the creation of a new field of self-help workers, motivational coaches, who were brought in by downsizing offices to ease the transition of laid-off workers as well as motivate the anxious and downtrodden workers who remained. Giants of the self-help industry like Tony Robbins and Zig Ziglar started their careers motivating such people, a fact from which the motivational industry does not shy away. "According to a 'history of coaching' on the Internet," Ehrenreich writes, "the coaching industry owed its huge growth in the 1990s to 'the loss of "careers for life"'" (115). Ziglar himself urged downsized workers to take responsibility for their fates: "It's your own fault; don't blame the system; don't blame the boss—work harder and pray more" (quoted in Ehrenreich, 115). The self-help and positive thinking industry decidedly shifted its tone in the wake of a cultural crisis. Gone were the days of simply finding positivity to find happiness. The positive thinking discourse began explicitly stating what might have previously been implicit: the individual is responsible for his or her own failure.

As structural security was systematically chiseled away, people reached for other methods of assurance. Micki McGee reports in *Self Help, Inc.* (2005) that "between 1972 and 2000, the number of self-help books more than doubled, increasing from 1.1 percent to 2.4 percent of the total number of books in print" (11-12). The historic boom in the self-help industry and specifically in positive thinking texts culminated in 2006 with the publication of perhaps the biggest success story in self-help literature of the last 30 years. *The Secret* not only sold record numbers of copies, topping bestseller lists; it also managed to gain mainstream traction through attention from some of the biggest names in early-21st-century media. Byrne made appearances on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Ellen Degeneres Show*, and *Larry King Live*, receiving universal praise for her unique approach to self-help. Nowhere in these outlets was there mention of some of the more controversial claims in Byrne's book: the aforementioned excuse for wealth inequality, the blame laid upon victims of natural disasters and genocide, and the attempts to legitimize positive thinking via selective citation—and bastardization—of quantum physics. Instead viewers were uncritically sold Byrne's claims as fact. At the same time that Byrne's book was finding unprecedented mainstream acclaim, a parallel movement in psychology was institutionally legitimizing some of positive thinking's oldest claims.

Psychology that Makes You Smile: Positive Psychology in the 21st Century

In recent years, positive thinking has reached a point of institutionalization via the positive psychology movement, a redirection of psychological study largely spearheaded by Martin Seligman. In his 1998 presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Seligman argued for a departure from psychology's "almost exclusive attention to pathology" in favor of a study of "a vision of the good life that is empirically sound" ("APA President Address 1998").

Positive psychology is a field of study that broadly describes a theoretical emphasis upon human flourishing and mental health rather than human failings and mental illness. It is a re-theorization of happiness within the psychological field not merely as the elimination of negative thoughts to a sort of mental equilibrium but rather understanding happiness as the ultimate positive point of human potential. In his 2002 book, *Authentic Happiness*, often cited as the foundational and central text for positive psychology, Seligman associates growing rates of depression and negativity with evolutionary determinism. He writes that negative emotions have carried over into the present precisely due to their positive value in evolutionary terms. Negative emotions, such as aversion and fear, keep us from taking risks that positive emotions such as optimism or trust might lead us to pursue. Therefore, according to Seligman, the modern abundance of negativity, and rising rates of depression, are due to the inheritance from our more cautious ancestors. In a world of relatively few dangers, positive emotions need to be valued to ensure human flourishing rather than mere human survival (30-31).[6]

To understand the emergence of positive psychology requires familiarity with the first use of that term. It was Abraham Maslow, father of the humanistic psychology movement of the 1950s, who introduced the term "positive psychology" in 1954 to describe his movement's theoretical emphasis on human potential and mental health and away from the study of mental illness that typified psychoanalysis and behaviorism (DeRobertis 424; Friedman 117). With origins in the 1950s, humanistic psychology began as an official academic psychological field in the 1960s before reaching its largest popularity in the 1970s and mostly fizzling out within

[6] This argument has a historical precedent in the work of a less popular New Thought writer, Horace Fletcher, who in his 1897 book, *Happiness as Found in Forethought minus Fearthought*, writes, "Fear has had its uses in the evolutionary process, and seems to constitute the whole of forethought, as instinct seems to constitute the whole of intelligence in most animals, but that it should remain any part of the mental equipment of human civilized life is an absurdity" (21-22).

academic psychology shortly thereafter, losing its battle for methodological and philosophical supremacy with the burgeoning field of cognitive psychology (Grogan ix). According to Jessica Grogan in her 2013 study of the humanistic psychology movement, Maslow was dissatisfied with the turn within academic psychology "toward scientism and the medical model" and hoped to return to the individualist, positive orientation of psychology that William James described in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* in relation to New Thought (Grogan 38-9). Humanistic psychology has a lasting legacy more as a social psychology than as an academic psychological field. It was concerned more with issues such as the individual "sense of agency in an increasingly mechanized and technologized world" and the American pursuit of identity "based on values distinct from those of both capitalism and Christianity" (xi). Humanistic psychology, unlike positive psychology, sympathized with mental illness and negativity as rational responses to psychologically oppressive political and economic systems (17). Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs, while seeing self-actualization as the ultimate human endeavor, was also a radical argument for the impossibility of self-actualization and happiness for certain oppressed groups of people (the poor, racial minorities, etc.). Humanistic psychology worked toward more humane management practices and celebrated a positive orientation toward the world at the same time that it tried to improve that world and make it suitable for perceiving positively. I see the differences between these two historically distinct fields of "positive psychology" as largely determined by the dominance of neoliberalism as a governing rationality. Where humanistic psychology emphasized human flourishing, it always acknowledged the problem of social and economic impediments to that flourishing, whereas positive psychology imagines the human individual as the only meaningful actor. Further, positive psychology, as I will show later, ultimately prioritizes success over happiness in its schema of human flourishing, a departure

from Maslow's prioritization of happiness and positive experience over success. If positive psychology's appropriation and reformulation of humanistic psychology was radical, its so-called extreme departure from late-20th-century academic psychology was in fact less radical than it might appear.

Methodologically, positive psychology emerged from the conjunction of cognitive therapies with the previously popular practice of behavior therapy in the 1970s, now called cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) (Walsh et al. 383). Ehrenreich writes of positive psychology as a development within academic psychology entirely without precedent, writing, "Until Seligman's ascendancy within the psychology profession, positive thinking had gained no purchase in the academy" (147), but the truth of positive psychology's history is more complicated than that. Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck's CBT shifted attention to clients' "problematic thinking" rather than behavior to diagnose mental illness, the theoretical assumption being that behavior is determined by "thought-patterns" (Walsh et al. 383). Though it may seem minor, this approach radically transformed the behaviorist approach, which theorized that action prefigured thought and feeling; now it was argued that only a change in thought and feeling could beget a change in behavior. An important development in CBT was Donald Meichenbaum's "narrative approach" to client treatment, which aims to adjust clients' personal narratives from "negative self-statements" to "positive statements of coping" (383). Like CBT practitioners, Seligman associates a healthy mind with healthy thoughts. One of Seligman's lasting contributions to positive psychology is his schema of optimism and pessimism, which he explains in *Authentic Happiness*. Seligman sees in mentally healthy people an optimism defined by both a sense of permanence about the positive things that happen to them and a sense of impermanence in regard to negative events. The opposite is true, Seligman writes, of pessimistic

people, who see permanence in negative events and impermanence in positive events (88). The personal histories they tell of themselves, their personal narratives, are responsible for their unhappiness. To make them happier, Seligman argues, one must instruct them to think more optimistically. Before Seligman even uttered the words "positive psychology," however, he was producing influential research into habits of pessimistic and optimistic people as early as 1972, with the publication of *Learned Helplessness*, a book Seligman co-authored with Christopher Peterson and Steven F. Maier. In that book, Seligman argues that depressive people learn responsibility in ways wholly dissimilar from optimistic people. Whereas depressive individuals feel no power to bring about change in their lives, optimistic individuals imagine complete control and responsibility over their lives.[7]

The Economics of Happiness: How Positive Thinking Met Neoliberalism at the Turn of the 21st Century

There is an argument to be made that positive thinking and its various schools of thought have become necessary coping mechanisms for individuals in the modern world. To launch an academic critique of such coping mechanisms, this argument might contend, would risk further marginalizing or even judging people who are merely doing what they need to do in order to find spiritual fulfillment. Is there any real harm, after all, in looking on the bright side, searching for silver linings, or judging a cup half-full? The problem with this defense is that positive thinking does not operate exactly in this manner in the current historical moment or, specifically in relation to this thesis, in 21st-century American culture. Positive thinking cannot be separated from its implications for the suffering of others, and it cannot escape the delusional perspective

[7] His findings in this book would become central to the torture of prisoners of war conducted by the United States military in its "War on Terror," as reported by Maria Konnikova for *The New Yorker*.

that it instills in its subjects. Positive thinking is, according to Ehrenreich, "part of our ideology" (4), and as such there is a cultural pressure in the United States to be positive. Beyond mere cultural pressure, however, is what Ehrenreich refers to as positive thinking's "symbiotic relationship with American capitalism" (7). In the 21st century, positive thinking has firmly entrenched itself within late, consumer capitalism, specifically the service industry and its demands of "emotional labor," as Arlie Russell Hochschild refers to it in *The Managed Heart* (1983). More insidiously, however, positive thinking has become a structuring mechanism within neoliberal capitalism and the new concept of the neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject.

Neoliberalism has become a fruitful subject of criticism within literary scholarship over recent years. It is most often defined through citation of David Harvey and his book on the subject, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), wherein neoliberalism is "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms" by way of strengthening "private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2). It is a form of government ostensibly premised on the tenets of libertarian notions of freedom, with government involvement only insofar as it is necessary for ensuring that freedom. It is characterized by intense privatization of all formerly public, government programs such as healthcare, incarceration, and education, with the final pursuit of bringing "all human action into the domain of the market" (3). Part of the process of achieving this market-oriented mode of subjectivity has involved systematic changes to the kind of job security offered by Fordism. Harvey writes that neoliberalization of the economy has resulted in "lower wages, increasing job insecurity, and in many instances loss of benefits and of job protections" (76). If Harvey offers a Marxist, class-based definition and critique of neoliberalism, Michel Foucault has emerged as an early theorist of a divergent definition of

neoliberalism as a set of normative principles for human behavior.[8] In his lectures at the College de France from 1978-1979, collected in the book, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault argues that neoliberalism governs by allowing individuals to govern themselves—a "governmentality" that functions not along class lines but rather disseminates throughout the entire body politic to structure the way subjects conceive of their own subjectivity. At the heart of neoliberalism, according to Foucault, is "a theory of *homo economicus*" not as "a partner of exchange," as in the classical conception via Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, but rather as "an entrepreneur of himself" (226). Using Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism as her base, Wendy Brown refers to neoliberalism in *Undoing the Demos* (2015) as a "normative order of reason" that has come to "structure life and activity as a whole" through an art of government characterized not by "command and punishment" but rather "conducting and compelling populations" (117).

Neoliberalism purports to have no preference for whether we are happy or sad, positive or negative: neoliberal freedom means that we are our own free agents; we can do and feel whatever we like. At the same time, however, the destabilization of secure employment under the neoliberal model of corporate conduct has made it such that the modes of subjectivity conducive to neoliberal capital emerge without the strong hand of authoritarian intervention. Neoliberalism effectively "governs at a distance," to borrow a phrase from Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller (179). It is a system of government that strips away corporate regulations and passes legislation that isolates the individual by way of such measures as eliminating the welfare state and breaking up and delegalizing unions, thus placing the individual in the position of necessary

[8] Foucault's analysis of early neoliberalism has seen tremendous attention within contemporary social analysis, including literary studies. The French thinker's exact position in regard to neoliberalism has, however, been the subject of considerable debate. Some, such as Michael Behrent in his article "Liberalism without Humanism" (2009), have argued that Foucault favored the neoliberal approach to governance. Wendy Brown offers a useful, if brief, argument against such readings of Foucault in *Undoing the Demos* (55-56).

action. Without a safety net, people are left with the dubious freedom of choice to make those choices that keep them afloat in the open ocean of the capitalist marketplace. Jane Elliott has referred to the form of subjectivity under neoliberalism as "suffering agency": that is, a form of subjectivity defined by "the need for the subject to take significant action on his or her own behalf" (85). Neoliberal government is constructed in such a way as to force the individual's hand by pulling away all manner of previously agreed-upon safety nets, giving all the decisions the weight of self-preservation, with the solution being arrived at via market-based evaluation. This reconceptualization of human decision-making according to market logics is echoed in the promises that positive psychology makes about the benefits of happiness.

Neoliberal subjectivity is a shift in the conception of the free individual subject toward a model in which, according to Carl Cederström and André Spicer, "individual responsibility and self-expression are morphed with the mindset of a free-market economist" (4). It is a conception of subjectivity in which freedom of choice is thought of as an obligation to choose the best route toward increasing one's "personal market value" (4). Philip Mirowski sees as pivotal to the nature of neoliberal subjectivity the individual adoption of "a persona that someone else would be willing to invest in, all in the name of personal improvement" (102). Among aspects of that perfect neoliberal persona that Mirowski describes is the belief in "the power of positive thinking" (102), quoting—if not citing—Peale's famous self-help text. Neoliberal ideologues have made governmental economic policy such that the individual is, as Rose puts it, "obliged to be free," left alone with little if any government safety net. It is a freedom in which individuals are made "to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice under conditions that systematically limit the capacities of so many to shape their own destiny" (17). As such, corporations now have all the power, constructing the image of what an individual is to aspire to

as an appealing job candidate. The subject under neoliberal capitalism is assumed to be "autonomous, potent, strong-willed and relentlessly striving to improve herself," thought to be entirely in control, regardless of external circumstances (Cederström and Spicer 6). Cederström and Spicer theorize that the insistence upon personal autonomy and control instills "a sense of guilt and anxiety" (6). This is to say that in the case of most people, the concept of the neoliberal everyman is not the truth, not the way we are, but rather the *essence* of the individual human subject according to neoliberalism, something to which one aspires rather than the default mode of human subjectivity. In a 2019 article, Annie McClanahan identifies a significant oversight in the scholarship on neoliberal subjectivity—namely the manner in which intellectual discourse and theory from neoliberal thinkers has managed to successfully establish a philosophical hegemony. In her estimation, political and cultural theorists must bridge the gap "between ideas consciously developed by a small group of intellectual ideologues and the unconscious beliefs of the majority" (108). In my thesis, I will fill this gap in part by arguing that positive thinking literature operates as a form of methodology for neoliberal governmentality, communicating a simplified version of neoliberal thought filtered through the pre-existing ideological framework of positive thinking. Inspired in part by the late-20th-century turn to the consumer capitalist model dominated by service industry workers, the ideal worker in the 21st century is one who is appealing in both physicality and personality, both healthy and happy. Cederström and Spicer write that, under neoliberal capitalism, "wellness has become an ideology" (3). Along with the healthy, insurance-premium-lite employee, 21st century capitalism idolizes the happy worker as inherently "good for business" (4). The happy worker is more productive, more forward thinking, and just generally more appealing to be around.

Under neoliberalism, positive thinking has taken on the quality of a cultural imperative, or what Alenka Zupancic refers to in *The Odd One In* as bio-morality. Under bio-morality, Zupancic writes:

> Negativity, lack, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, are perceived more and more as moral faults—worse, as a corruption at the level of our very being or bare life. There is a spectacular rise of what we might call a bio-morality (as well as morality of feelings and emotions), which promotes the following fundamental axiom: a person who feels good (and is happy) is a good person; a person who feels bad is a bad person. (5)

Ehrenreich writes that positive thinking's promise of boundless fortune and happiness entails "a harsh insistence on personal responsibility" (8). If the individual is unhappy or unsuccessful, he or she simply does not believe hard enough, is not positive enough in regard to his or her future. The key to happiness and success—corporations, psychologists, and self-help gurus agree—has been discovered, and now it is left to the individual to properly utilize it. To not do so signifies one's own failings or laziness rather than the failings of the model. There is more than the moral thrust of personal responsibility, however, that underpins some of the problems of modern positive thinking. Within the logic of positive thinking is also a unique relation to past, present, and future.

The Happy Time of Positive Thinking

Tal Ben-Shahar, professor at Harvard University of an introductory positive psychology course that is apparently "the largest class at the university" (xii), writes in his 2008 summary of the psychological discipline that happiness is "the end toward which all other ends lead" (xii). The truth, however, is that happiness seems in most popular positive psychological texts to be

evaluated not as an end but rather according to its utility toward other ends, most notably success and performance at work. Shawn Achor, in *Before Happiness*, his 2013 follow-up to the 2010 bestseller *The Happiness Advantage*, reveals to the reader that "*the better your brain is at using its energy to focus on the positives, the greater your chances at success*" (3, emphasis in the original). Emma Seppällä writes in *The Happiness Track* that research proves "happiness is not the *outcome* of success but rather its *precursor*" (7). Seligman writes in *Authentic Happiness* that "more happiness actually causes more productivity and higher income" (40). While potentially emancipatory in its endorsement of happiness as a means of achieving success, rather than the more traditional capitalist narrative of happiness as the *product* of material success, the emphasis in positive psychology on the necessity of achieving happiness before one can achieve success situates the narrative within a neoliberal discourse of emotional labor committed solely to the end of increasing one's human capital.

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus writes in his *Discourses* that "it is never possible to make happiness consistent with a longing after what is not present. For true happiness implies the possession of all which is desired, as in case of satiety with food; there must be no thirst, no hunger" (186). In this formulation, happiness is the emotional consequence of a comfortable life. Other than defining what happiness is and is not, though, Epictetus also provides useful insight into the paradox of neoliberal happiness discourse. Happiness according to positive thinking is a state of mind that one achieves through a positive attitude. Thinking positively, we are told, begets positive results, the end product being happiness. Likewise, happiness in the present is determined in part by a positive disposition; one cannot be both negative and happy. Positive thinking, then, is both the form of happiness and the path to happiness. This creates a sort of temporal paradox that Sam Binkley refers to as "a happiness in anticipation of happiness" (57). If

in the first instance happiness is gained through the adoption of a positive, optimistic outlook, an outlook founded upon a future-tense logic of emotional fortune *to come*, and happiness is also determined by the presence of that same positive outlook, this begs the question of when the individual is experiencing actual, authentic happiness. It would appear on the surface that this formulation is an overly complex presentation of the self-help bromide, "Fake it 'til you make it."[9] And if this is indeed the case, if one is to fake happiness until finally achieving happiness, the issue of the *moment of happiness* becomes ever more problematic. This temporal logic means that happiness is always on the horizon; the happiness project is always in process. Just as with neoliberal self-management, one is never done monitoring one's own behaviors and moods.

Positive thinking has a relationship to the present that goes back to its philosophical origins in the work of the 18th-century German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In his 1710 treatise *Theodicy*, Leibniz famously disputes the Epicurean problem of evil by arguing that God, as a being who has the ability to think of an infinite number of possible worlds, has by virtue of his goodness created our world as "the best of all possible worlds" (228), a view French writer and philosopher Voltaire would later satirize in his 1759 novella, *Candide*. The term assigned to Leibniz's famous defense of God is *philosophical optimism*, and it is from this work that the English word *optimism* derives ("optimism, n."). As with Leibniz's initial theorization of optimism, positive thinking is always conservative in nature, arguing as it does that the given, actual world is satisfactory, that it begs neither inquiry nor adjustment. By positing that this world is the best, any kind of political dissent is immediately dismissible on the grounds that the

[9] The origins of this phrase are obscure, but if it did not originate from positive thinking, it has since been absorbed within that discourse. Byrne writes in *The Secret* about "make-believe" in a manner similar to the saying "fake it 'til you make it," even if she does not use this exact phrasing. She writes, "How do you get yourself to a point of believing? Start make-believing. Be like a child, and make-believe. Act as if you have it already" (50). Pre-dating Byrne by over a century, William James writes in *On Vital Reserves* (1899), "Thus the sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness, if our spontaneous cheerfulness be lost, is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there" (45).

given world is as good as it gets. It is this quality that bestows positive thinking with the normative, status quo confirmation, or the "acceptance of things as they are" that Herbert Marcuse ascribes to it in his 1964 book, *One-Dimensional Man* (176).

Writing Against Positivity: Contemporary American Literature and Positive Thinking

A confrontation with positive thinking is a confrontation with one of the most popular forms of American attempts at dealing with despair, and much significant American literature of the last 25 years stages a debate with positive thinking and the symbiotic relationship it has formed with neoliberal capitalism. Positive thinking not only acts on the level of consciousness, the endless effort to correct our negativity being a pursuit consciously undertaken; it also occurs on the level of language, the unique domain for literary inquiry. One of the core tenets of positive thinking is changing a negative perception into a positive one through a reinterpretation, a reverbalization. What was once suffering is now striving. What was once lack is now enough. What was once unhappy is now *on the way to* happy. Positive thinking is a fundamental reevaluation of language whereby negative words are essentially excised and disposed of. To neurologically eliminate negative language from an individual's lexicon would be the positive thinking utopia. I will be using the various short stories, novels, and poetry in this thesis to explore the multivalent implications, connotations, and applications of positive thinking as a term and a practice.

The first chapter of my thesis focuses on the representation of collective positive thinking in precarious workplaces. Ed Park's *Personal Days* (2008) is an office novel set one year after an event described as the Firings, a period of downsizing that shook the remaining workers and continues to linger in their minds. On its publication, *Personal Days* was largely overshadowed by Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* (2007), another novel detailing the remaining

months of a white-collar office. Both novels employ the first-person plural point of view in stories set within white collar workplaces amidst seasons of drastic layoffs. Both novels present the onset of layoffs as distinct and traumatic events. In *Personal Days*, the common response to the shared trauma is to look forward with a positive attitude—to see light at the end of the tunnel. In this way, positive thinking is imagined as a response to negative circumstances: it is a survival mechanism, but there are ways in which this positive outlook is fostered by American culture generally and the precarious capitalist system specifically. In Ferris's novel, the group of precarious advertising workers emerges mostly unscathed, and it is within this narrative trajectory, I argue, that the novel's own brand of positive thinking lies. Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods* (2011), however, flips the script on the downsizing narrative as it had already been established by Ferris and Park. Rather than feature those who are targeted by layoffs, DeWitt is more interested in her novel in the kinds of people who rig the economy to suit their needs and normalize precarity in their wake. For DeWitt, the losers in the new economy are also lost to history. History is written by the victor, and *Lightning Rods* depicts an untraditional story that somehow also traditionally plays out the American entrepreneurial narrative—a bildungsroman for the capitalist class. If the tragedy of Park's and Ferris's positive thinkers is that they are losers in a system set up to exploit them while all the time keeping up their good cheer, DeWitt painstakingly describes the kind of positive thinking that characterizes the truly successful. The disadvantaged use positive thinking to insulate themselves from realizing the tragedy of their situations, while the successful use positive thinking to prevent any kind of introspection or ethical reflection.

My second chapter is a study of the body, mortality, and waste as they relate to positive thinking and neoliberalism. This chapter is a Foucauldian application of Ernest Becker's *Denial*

of Death (1973), in which he argues that Western society is founded upon the search for immortality and the repression of death. Richard Powers's novel *Gain* (1998) historicizes the rise of American corporations in the fictional soap company, Clare, alongside the contemporary narrative of a woman's battle with cancer. The novel deals with positive thinking in two ways: in the story of Laura Bodey, positive thinking texts offer a way of avoiding confrontation with her own mortality; in the story of Clare, the immortal longing at the heart of the capitalist enterprise is dramatized in the particular example of a soap company, which is literally founded on the premise of cleanliness and the expulsion of dirt or waste. I also provide a reading of Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013) and the way in which the author imagines a 21st-century dystopia from the point of view of a positive utopian. Eggers writes extensively about the idea of "transparency" and how it becomes the animating idea of a contemporary tech company's vision for the world. Included under this umbrella term is the transparency of the body, which in the novel is subjected to surveillance and scrutiny not only by the company but especially by the individual him- or herself. The novel dichotomizes cleanliness and filth, positivity and negativity, techno-utopianism and technophobia, fitness and infirmity. Common among Eggers's and Powers's two novels is the implication that neoliberal capitalism subjects the individual's body not only to scrutiny but also to death, a theme that Claudia Rankine explores specifically in the context of the existential threat imposed by the state on the black body. Rankine writes in her book-length poetic essay, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), of the specificity of black precarity in contemporary America. If the avoidance of death and its inevitability is treated alternatively metaphorically and literally in *The Circle* and *Gain*, Rankine illustrates the manner in which thoughts of death permeate the African American psyche in an explicit and literal fashion. In her essay-poem, Rankine situates anecdotal accounts of micro-aggressions alongside more visible

instances of violent racism to place the black body within a historical continuum of violence and bigotry at odds with the progressivist account of history provided by American positive thinking. This chapter figures as a natural transition between the chapter on downsizing, in which laid off employees are seen as the waste product of the corporate body, the fat that can be trimmed, and the following chapter on scientific discourses on the mind and the latent positivism of reductionist materialism.

My third chapter addresses the scientific reduction of individuals within the life sciences: specifically genetic and cognitive sciences. I examine the manner in which contemporary scientific discourse is wrapped up with neoliberal concerns and functions similarly in effect to the more straightforward positive thinking that I discuss in the previous chapters. In my reading of recent American fiction—including Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, George Saunders's "Escape from Spiderhead," and Richard Powers's *Generosity*—the method of reductionist models of materialism within the life sciences is to break down the individual into the smallest constituent parts to discover the most basic units of causality as regards various ailments and emotional dispositions. Generally used within the pharmacological branches of both genetic and neurological sciences to reveal the functions of specific genes and neurons respectively, these discoveries are utilized toward the end of developing specialized drugs. What characterizes this practice as a type of positive thinking is the way in which reductionist methodologies/ontologies accept the environment (the social, the cultural, and the political) as it is and dispense with the need to change anything outside of individual—yet unindividualized—biology, a quality shared by traditional New Thought positive thinking. I will in this chapter develop the term *positive realism* to describe a form of positivity that does not necessarily match positive thinking as it has so far been described but rather has an identical impact on the socio-political landscape in its

unquestioning adherence to the status quo. It is my view that the authors I have selected purposefully stage an analogy between American positive thinking and reductionist materialism in their use of positive thinkers in stories more explicitly concerned with contemporary scientific discourse. In *The Corrections* (2001), Franzen takes aim at the role reductionist neuroscience plays in obscuring our understanding of the ultimate causes of our behaviors or feelings in favor of proximate causes such as certain synapses or neurons in our brains firing rather than others. In his short story "Escape from Spiderhead," Saunders launches a particularly ethical response to a hypothetical world in which the dictums of reductionist materialist science—specifically neuroscience and psychopharmacology—have been accepted as the dominant discourse. In *Generosity*, Powers explores two distinct factors of modern materialist science that align it directly with positive thinking. The first is the way in which a reductionist materialism reinforces the status quo; the second is the late-20th century intellectual movement, transhumanism, which—though based on scientific premises and pursued through technological innovation—has been met with considerable scorn within the mainstream scientific community. If Powers stages in *Generosity* the way in which individual lives are dispensed with in scientific discourses in favor of species narratives, Saunders explicitly demonstrates the manner in which individual narratives are crucial both on their own as well as for understanding more collective narratives.

My final chapter focuses on positive thinking's repressed element, negative thinking. This chapter, as a counterbalance to the positivity in the rest of the thesis, features negative thinking and contemporary novelistic considerations of the modes available within dissenting discourses. Consistent in all the texts is an agreement that the present is characterized by a resignation to the given state of things, the neoliberal form of capitalism. Francis Fukuyama famously declared that the disintegration of the Soviet Union at the end of the 20th century

signaled the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy as the only remaining forms that politics at "the end of history" could take. The supposed victory of capitalism led many to abandon the pursuit of political alternatives, a state that Mark Fisher describes as "capitalist realism." It is this state that is the point of departure for the texts in the final chapter. Saunders's short story, "Brad Carrigan, American," gives a representative account of a character oppositional to both his dominant culture and the mode of thought, positive thinking, that structures that culture. Saunders's vision, however, limits the prospects for negative thinking to individual concerns and largely forecloses on the possibility of political or historical forms of negativity. I continue my analysis of literary negativity, then, with Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers,* a novel that meaningfully engages with the political and historical dimensions of negation, specifically Theodor Adorno's account of a *negative dialectic*. The novel stages the typical developmental novel, the *Bildungsroman,* in a time when historical development is all but stunted. Colson Whitehead continues Kushner's critique with an allegorical spin, representing the eschatology behind Fukuyama's claims about "the end of history" in the form of a post-apocalyptic zombie novel. If the triumph of capitalism has truly led to history's end, then *Zone One* imagines that end's survivors as the living dead.

It is worth concluding this introduction by situating my approach within the context of contemporary literary studies. The late-20th century saw the founding of what has been called "the affective turn" in literary studies. Beginning with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her application of Silvan Tomkins' psychological theories on affect, literary affect theory has grown into a diverse school of literary scholarship, centered on an analysis of literature which prioritizes emotional tone and effect. The discipline has since diversified to include scholars such as Sianne Ngai, Sara Ahmed, and Lauren Berlant. Ngai writes in *Ugly Feelings* (2005) about

"the aesthetics of negative emotions," namely envy, irritation, anxiety, and paranoia, as well as a few for which she creates her own terms (1). Ngai takes seriously negative emotions that "render visible different registers of problem" (3). Following Ngai's example, Ahmed writes in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) of the cultural and political dynamics of happiness within a contemporary cultural moment she refers to as a "happiness turn" (2). Berlant's 2011 book, *Cruel Optimism*, is perhaps closest in content to my own approach. Berlant writes of optimism as an affective attachment to certain objects and argues that her term "cruel optimism" refers to those objects which obstruct individual well-being or "flourishing" (1). I broadly situate my own approach in this thesis within the tradition of affect theory, but with a few key differentiations. Where the abovementioned scholars tend to focus on the representations of individual emotional experience, and how individuals navigate political structures emotionally, I begin my own analysis, guided by the texts I study, from the premise that positive thinking functions more cognitively than emotionally. Though I try to understand the emotional dynamics to positive thinking—the way it acts in many texts as an intervention into hopelessness or grief, and how it is often used by those in search of what might be called happiness or joy—my approach in this thesis is guided by an analysis of positive thinking as something other than affective experience. That is, rather than see the conversion of a negative emotion to a positive one as a pre-cognitive phenomenon, I study positive thinking as a purposeful, cognitive mechanism. Affect theory played an important role in reinvigorating the study of political affect and emotion within a postmodern academic setting where such matters were largely overlooked. The discipline helped to centralize pre-cognitive experience in culture and literature. The theoretical gains from affect theory will operate as a point of departure for my thesis, as I grapple with a discourse that exists at the conjunction of emotional and cognitive experience. By looking at a wide selection of not

only the biggest names in American literature of the last 25 years but also some of their most important texts, I will illustrate in my thesis the centrality of positive thinking to contemporary American literature.

Chapter 1

Positively Precarious: The Contingent Office in Park, Ferris and DeWitt

"I would not like to characterize this as a plea, although it may start to sound like one" (83). Thus opens George Saunders's 2012 short story, "Exhortation," written in the form of a workplace memo sent out by a middle manager named Todd Birnie. Todd reminds the staff at his firm that "we have a job to do" (83), subtly hinting at the pressure on him to ensure that those under him perform satisfactorily. "Now we all know," he adds, "that one way to do a job poorly is to be negative" (83). Using the example of cleaning a shelf, Todd explains how complaining and being negative about having to clean the shelf, "investigating the moral niceties of cleaning the shelf," makes cleaning the shelf a longer, more arduous process than it needs to be (84). Add to this the fact that work in Todd's story world is apparently hard to come by, and it becomes evident that the shelf *will* be cleaned "by you or the guy who replaces you and gets your paycheck" (84). Though Todd dances around the suggestion that negativity in the workplace will result in termination, the subtext here is that the preferred—or rather, required—attitude is positivity. It is safe to say that when Todd rhetorically asks his employees, "What am I saying? Am I saying whistle while you work?" the implied answer is "yes" (83).

Todd's warnings do not stop at the threat of firing, however. Things take a mortal turn as the short story comes to a close and Todd sends his final message to a group of mostly nameless employees. Whatever it is that the people at this office do, all the worst work is undertaken in Room 6. Todd admits that "no one is trying to deny that Room 6 can be a bummer, it is very hard work that we do" (88). However, Todd also understands that "the people above us […] think that the work we do in Room 6, in addition to being *hard*, is also *important*, which I suspect is why

they have begun watching our numbers so closely" (88). He warns the employees that the only thing that will make Room 6 "an even worse bummer" is complaining about the work every step of the way, which will make matters even worse because productivity will drop even further (88). Todd's euphemistic language leads the reader to believe that the work in Room 6 involves some manner of torture: he makes reference to one employee's exemplary performance required "additional cleanup towels" (86). Todd warns his employees "that if we are unable to clean our assigned 'shelf,' not only will someone else be brought in to clean that 'shelf,' but we ourselves may find ourselves on that 'shelf,' being that 'shelf,' with someone else exerting themselves with good positive energy all over us" (88-89). In a very real way, the workers at Todd's firm must, citing Ehrenreich's terms here, "smile or die."

It has been well documented that Saunders has devoted much of his oeuvre to representing the suffering of those worst off in the new economy, and that has, in turn, led many critics to analyze Saunders's work in relation to the contemporary phenomenon of neoliberal precarity.[1] In "Exhortation," however, the story is delivered not from the point of view of the bottom-of-the-rung office worker but a middle manager, or rather, a member of the class of workers Barbara and John Ehrenreich termed the "Professional-Managerial Class ('PMC')" (11). Though members of the PMC are featured elsewhere in Saunders's oeuvre, its representatives are often depicted fairly negatively from the perspectives of the stories' more clearly sympathetic wage workers.[2] The office in "Exhortation," though it may be the site of torture, is structurally

[1] Kasia Boddy, for example, pays close attention to the emotional labor of Saunders's destitute characters, while Catherine Garnett studies several of Saunders's stories in the context of what she refers to as "pastoral precarity." Alex Millen writes of Saunders's "characters' unbending insistence on the power of positivity in the face of abject desperation" (133), Anthony Hutchison writes about neoliberal precarity in Saunders's "Sea Oak," and David Rando refers to Saunders's destitute protagonists as "no-life lowlifes" (441).

[2] Examples of these types of stories, in which workers are pitted against their immediate middle-management superiors, are: "Pastoralia," in which two amusement park workers are made adversaries by their supervisor; and "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," in which the protagonist is threatened with expulsion from his job—also as a worker at an amusement park—if he reports his murderous coworker to the police. In both these stories, precarious

similar to a white-collar office, featuring the unique emotional and political positions of workers on three different levels of employment. At the bottom are the people who do most of the daily work, the people to whom Todd addresses his "plea." Todd refers to his bosses as "the people above *us*, who give *us* our assignments" (88, emphasis mine), situating himself—the middle manager—in a peculiar position: he has enough authority that he is made responsible for organizing his subordinates, albeit he must do so carefully and always with an air of friendliness and positivity; yet he is low enough that he counts himself among his workers in relation to their shared precarity.[3] Todd is a parrot of positive thinking discourse, and yet he believes in it more than anyone. To inspire the recipients of his memo, Todd tells them a story in which he had to lift "an actual dead rotting whale" (84) while on a beach holiday, a task made "harder," he reports, when attempted "with a negative attitude" (85). Todd reveals that the whale was successfully lifted only when "a former Marine" told them to apply "mind over matter," a feat achieved—Todd believes—via his positive energy, as well as "some big straps that Marine had in his van" (85). In this specific passage, Todd reveals that the positive thinking he is selling his workers is no ploy but rather an earnest—and misguided—belief. This peculiar phenomenon, white-collar precarity and its characteristic positivity, will be the focus of this chapter.

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employment and the grim prospects of alternative career options act as the imminently threatening context for any acts of insubordination.

[3] Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich track the PMC's historical creation between 1890 and 1920, or "the Progressive Era" (19). They write that the PMC's function as a class is distinct from the "classical petty bourgeoisie" as described by Marx: "The classical petty bourgeoisie lies outside the polarity of labor and capital. It is made up of people who are neither employed by capital nor themselves employers of labor […] The PMC, by contrast, is employed by capital and it manages, controls, has authority over labor (though it does not directly employ it)" (18, emphasis in the original). The structural position of Todd Birnie in "Exhortation" is well described by Gabriel Winant's updated analysis of the PMC: "The PMC is not the ruling class, it merely serves it, deliberately or inadvertently. In this way, professionals do share something with the working class, which is why it is possible to imagine their realignment with working class interests: they share the lack of ultimate control over their conditions of labor" ("Professional-Managerial Chasm").

In an American context, many recent novels and short stories feature white-collar work to some extent, but fewer discuss work in the context of labor's precarious turn.[4] Saunders seems an outlier among contemporary writers when it comes to the proportion of his oeuvre dedicated to working protagonists in perpetual fear of losing their jobs. At the time of writing, there are only two monographs dedicated specifically to literary descriptions of precarious labor, perhaps due to the relative lack of such literature. The more recent study, Liam Connell's *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel* (2017), is an analysis of several different forms of precarious labor around the globe: from white-collar work, to blue-collar work, to Indian call centers. The earlier book on the subject, Andrew Hoberek's *The Twilight of the Middle Class* (2005), is an important historical literary study of American white-collar fiction from the mid-to-late twentieth century. Building on these works, in this chapter I will be analyzing three more recent novels depicting economic trends in twenty-first-century American white-collar workplaces. The first two, Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* (2007) and Ed Park's *Personal Days* (2008), are novels set within "downsizing" offices, and both make use of the relatively rare first-person plural narrative perspective.[5] The third, Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods* (2011), is written from the point of view of an entrepreneur rather than a lowly office worker, but the narrative is delivered in a neoliberal commonsense register that reads like a similar kind of collective perspective.

[4] The popular television series *The Office* (2005-2013)—an American adaptation of the English series created by Ricky Gervais—is exemplary of this unwillingness to describe the precarious turn in too much detail. The series begins in its first season with a cynical take on office politics and the contemporary phenomenon of downsizing, only to perform an about-face in its second and subsequent seasons, in particular transforming its formerly morally repugnant middle-manager character, Michael Scott (played by Steve Carrell), into a kind of lovable naïf.

[5] I understand the term *downsizing* to be highly ideological, a word that would be at home in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is, however, the word often used to describe the mass termination of employment for an organization's staff, and I shall continue to use it in that way.

The main characters in each novel, those workers who are at continual existential risk of losing their jobs, are victims of a growing trend of insecure employment under neoliberal capitalism first described by Pierre Bourdieu as *precarity*. In a 1997 talk, Bourdieu announced that "job insecurity is now everywhere" ("Job Insecurity" 82).[6] For Bourdieu, the psychological and emotional effects of precarious labor are clear and tangible, and they form the primary concern of a critique of the phenomenon of casualized labor. Precarious labor entails for the unemployed or precariously employed "the destructuring of existence, which is deprived among other things of its temporal structures, and the ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time and space" (82). A precarious employment environment also makes traditionally stable forms of labor increasingly contingent and insecure; full-time laborers come to see their jobs as "a privilege, a fragile, threatened privilege" (82-3). All three novels in this chapter showcase to different extents the environment Bourdieu described more than twenty years ago, with, of course, certain updated elements. As such, these novels belong to a category of fiction that I will term *workplace precarity fictions*, texts that critically portray insecure employment in neoliberal workplaces, or, in Kathleen Millar's phrasing, texts that show "what precarity does" (5).

The neoliberal turn has brought with it an emphasis on job flexibility. The post-Fordist model of capitalism has resulted in a corporate climate of short-term contracts and insecure employment. Harvey writes that "neoliberalization was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power" (16). Part of this project has entailed an overhaul of the Fordist model of secure labor in most markets; Cederström and Spicer report that "zero-hour

[6] Bourdieu's first use of the term *precarity* (or *precarité* in the original French) appears in the much earlier book, *Travail et Travailleurs en Algérie* (1963), which he refers to in his abovementioned talk as his "oldest and perhaps most contemporary book" (83).

contracts" have become the norm in some employment domains (20). By the mid-20th century, white-collar work was in fact already experiencing a precarious turn, as capital concentrated in the hands of the capitalist class. If the model of the white-collar worker at the turn-of-the-20th century was the small business entrepreneur who owned the property on which he worked, the model by the mid-20th century was the office worker/manager, "the dependent employee," as C. Wright Mills writes (xii). The white-collar worker was still affluent, as Andrew Hoberek points out, but in retrospect the decline in job security since the postwar period "suggests that this [affluence] had more to do with the postwar boom and the redistributive policies of the mid-century welfare state than with the inherent nature of the postwar economy" (6). If white-collar precarity in the mid-century was represented in the turn away from property ownership toward simple income accumulation, the more recent precarization of white-collar work has targeted income and job security. Barbara Ehrenreich connects this latest state of precarity to "the advent of 'finance capitalism' in the 1980s, [whereby] shareholders' profits came to trump all other considerations" (108). As Bourdieu argues in a 2000 address delivered to the students of Berlin's Humboldt University, finance capitalism places undue stress on short-term profit motives, "which firms can yield only through mass layoffs" ("The Invisible Hand" 28). Any kind of job security that the white-collar middle class had at the mid-century has all but evaporated. One must always be striving to both attempt to stay in one's current job and also mentally prepare for the next job. To stay employable under precarious employment conditions, Cederström and Spicer argue, individuals must avoid being demoralized by the anxieties induced by their precarity; one must, rather, "hide these feelings and project a confident, upbeat, employable self" (20). This is part of the larger project of neoliberal governmentality to govern *through* precarity. As Byung-Chul Han writes, the neoliberalization of capitalism "dismantl[es] continuity and

progressively integrat[es] instability in order to enhance productivity" (46). For Han, this signals a departure from the rational capitalism of Fordism toward what has been called *emotional capitalism*, which Han sees as the logical move within capitalism's neoliberal turn.[7] Governing through freedom requires engaging with individuals' emotions rather than imposing a strict schema of rational action.

The effect, if not explicitly the goal, of positive thinking and its various proponents is to deny the effect of "structural insecurities of the modern economy" on individual success and well-being in favor of locating failure and unhappiness within the individual psyche (Cederström and Spicer 20). What could become political or class consciousness is internalized, made into self-consciousness. Structural insecurity and precarity normalize chaos and withdraw the individual from thoughts of futurity: if the present is anxious and the future is uncertain, consciousness becomes stuck in the ephemeral moment.[8] In his account of precarity, Bourdieu pays special attention to the effect of insecure labor on future-oriented consciousness, writing that "by making the whole future uncertain, [precarity] prevents all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions" (82). Worse still, this structural precarity, this sense/reality of impermanence, is explained away within the corporate discourse as simply "an immediate reflection of the basic nature of reality" (Cederström and Spicer 25). In a 2006 article by Karl E. Weick and Ted Putnam in the *Journal of Management Inquiry*, impermanence is

[7] "Emotional capitalism" is Eva Illouz's term from her book, *Cold Intimacies*. While Illouz does not thoroughly periodize her term, seeing in fact an emotional component to capitalism from its beginnings—starting with Marx's description of alienation; through the late 19th century with Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* (1905) and the sociological work of Durkheim; and into the 20th century with Foucault's analysis of biopolitics and governmentality and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus—Han analyzes the turn from rational to emotional capitalism captured in the movement from industrial production in the Fordist model to the "immaterial production" of consumer, neoliberal capitalism (44).

[8] Futurity is the subject of a very rich body of research in contemporary Marxist criticism, including, for example, Marc Auge's *The Future* (2012) and Franco "Bifo" Berardi's *Futurability* (2017).

described as a given "quality of experience," a reflection of the reality of consciousness that "moment-to-moment experience is all there is" (280). In other words, one cannot but live merely in the present tense; never mind the fact of future-oriented cognition and behavior.[9]

With structural precarity a supposed given, the individual is only afforded himself as a focus for employability and improvement. Scrutiny is dislocated from the structure and relocated onto the individual. A central quality of positive thinking is that "it will never be finished" (Cederström and Spicer 39). One can always regress back into negativity, and one can always hope for and expect more from one's life. Positivity has no logical terminus. This produces, Zygmunt Bauman argues in the context of contemporary emphases upon fitness, "perpetual self-scrutiny, self-reproach and self-deprecation, and so also continuous anxiety" (78). The logic of positive thinking, in this feedback loop of self-perpetuating and exponentially increasing anxiety, is circular and thus never-ending. As a curative for the anxieties of potential structural unemployability and especially structural precarity—the always-almost-unemployed quality of neoliberal capitalism—positive thinking and the perpetual work it entails generates its own anxieties. The *positive* quality of neoliberal self-regimentation is thus the idea that one can continually and perpetually improve oneself; there is no *being-finished* within neoliberal governmentality's temporal logics.

This shift in job security has been met by self-help trends that exalt and naturalize flexibility in the open marketplace of employment. One such book is Leonard Mlodinow's *Elastic* (2018), in which the writer argues for a more flexible thinking style to suit the growing culture of instability. A *Scientific American* interview with Mlodinow is fittingly—yet uncritically—titled "The Power of Flexible Thinking." What is interesting about the term *flexible*

[9] Consciousness has become a sort of battleground for neoliberal science, as I will discuss in my third chapter.

thinking is that it somehow perfectly captures the harmful nature of positive thinking without any kind of self-awareness. Flexible thinking calls for an attitude of acquiescence to constant change, one that accepts growing rates of job precarity and an increase in the permanently unemployed and unemployable workforce. While it may be true that flexibility to change keeps the ever-precarious worker afloat, the emphasis on this habit of thought—the redirection of attention from the structure to the individual—essentially normalizes precarity. While Park is highly suspicious of such normalization, depicting in *Personal Days* the estranging effects of structural insecurity, Ferris manages to *enact* this normalization through the concluding section of his own novel. In *Then We Came to the End*, a book about layoffs somehow becomes merely a book about work, as if that was its subject all along. Meanwhile, DeWitt captures perfectly the narrative cadences of Mlodinow's flexible thinking in the character of a highly successful entrepreneur who seems to effortlessly make it up as he goes along.

While *Personal Days* and *Then We Came to the End* clearly illustrate the psychosocial effects of job insecurity, and especially the way that positive thinking discourses enter insecure workplaces, their shared use of the first-person plural point of view nevertheless opens up the possibility for a revolutionary consciousness, a form of collective thinking significantly different from the individualized positive thinking that neoliberalism emphasizes. This collective thinking would harbor the potential for a utopian vision of political possibility that harmonizes the fractious yet similar individuals who have fallen victim to neoliberalism's cruel politics. However, whatever possibilities these authors open up with their individual uses of the first-person plural remain dormant by the time of their novels' endings. While the characters that people them all certainly struggle in similar ways, they also all do so individually. Most striking about Park's and Ferris's novels is the way in which the plural narrators describe group suffering

without any real sense of a group unity. Rather, it seems that the anxieties produced by job insecurity explicitly individuate and isolate people from groups to which they naturally belong. This paradox recalls C. Wright Mills's words in the beginning of his groundbreaking study of white-collar work, *White Collar* (1953), in which he writes, "whatever common interests they have do not lead to unity" (ix). In *Lightning Rods*, DeWitt suggests that this lack of unity is due in part to an entirely different kind of collectivity endorsed within neoliberal capitalism. DeWitt's novel voices its free-indirect narration in a neoliberal commonsense register that her protagonist, Joe, consistently appeals to. This commonsense register, one that makes an appearance not only in Joe's narration but in the voices of two minor characters who talk just like Joe, suggests a kind of communal wisdom at work among the kind of people who succeed in the world of precarious work that DeWitt describes.

All these authors represent different formulations of positivity as it embeds itself within narratives of growth, decline, or relative stagnation. If the tragedy of Park's and Ferris's positive thinkers is that they are losers in a system set up to exploit them while all the time keeping up their good cheer, DeWitt painstakingly describes the kind of positive thinking that characterizes the truly successful. The disadvantaged use positive thinking to insulate themselves from realizing the tragedy of their situations, while the successful use positive thinking to prevent any kind of introspection or ethical reflection. DeWitt shows the various ways that stories of individual progress and triumph are not as victimless as they claim to be. Beyond the fact that, in a world of precarious work, one individual's success tends to foreclose on another's chances, DeWitt shows readers how enormous success in America is always somehow contingent upon the suffering of entire groups of people. In the zero-sum game of contemporary capitalism,

success does not result in distributed economic prosperity but rather well-concealed—or at the very least positively spun—exploitation.

Then We Came to the End of Collective Imagination: The Humane Workplace and Its Repressed Sadism in Ed Park's *Personal Days*

Personal Days opens with an evocation of surfaces and depths that introduces the problem posed by the economic insecurity of workplace layoffs. The opening paragraph begins, "On the surface, it's relaxed. There was a time when we all dressed crisply, but something's changed this summer. Now while the weather lasts we wear loose pants, canvas sneakers, clogs" (3). What is relaxed here is the sloppy attire of the office workers who have only recently begun wearing more casual clothing to work in contrast to what the reader assumes was once business wear. While it appears relaxed on the surface, the first-person plural narrator goes on to explain the very unrelaxed nature of this recent adaptation. "Sometimes," the narrator notes, "one of the guys will come to work in a coat and tie, just to freak the others out. On these days the guard in the lobby will joke, *Who died?* And we will laugh or pretend to laugh" (3). What floats under the relaxed surface is the real panic that the new attire represents. Though the reason is unclear at this point in the story, the reader senses that any slight indication of superior professionalism from one of the workers represents the risk of unemployment for the rest of them. This passage, though the first chunk of narrative, is actually prefaced with a section headline that reads, "Who died?" (3). Section headlines like this one break up all the scenes throughout the novel, but upon first reading, the form—with the headline in bold and directly above the following text—takes on the appearance of a question-and-answer format, the opening paragraph going on to answer the question of "Who died?" It becomes increasingly clear as the reader progresses that the

company at which the main group of characters work is going through a period of extensive restructuring. With this information in mind, Park's choice of first line for the novel—Who died?—shows the employed existence of his characters to approximate existence itself.

The opening act's form—short chunks of text all demarcated with a title in bold typeface—reflects the often-contradictory elements of surface and depth. Section headlines give the impression that everything has been properly labeled, every element of the novel given its proper location and designation: filed away, as it were; while the narrative that follows the headlines describes the chaos of lived precarity. This element is made more pronounced in the second act, which is structured much like a legal document, every section designated by a series of roman numerals and letters. In the last act of the novel, the only section narrated directly by an individual employee, all this order is dispensed with in favor of a chaotic, meandering run-on sentence upwards of 40 pages long. If "on the surface," the narrative is "relaxed" and ordered, the last act attests to the repressed element of mid-downsizing corporate life, in which moment-to-moment experience is characterized increasingly by chaos, anxiety and disorder.

The workers' boss, Russell, nicknamed "the Sprout" according to the following scheme ("Russell→Brussels→brussels sprouts→*the Sprout*"), exemplifies the typical good cop middle manager (Park 4), a figure in the mold of Saunders's Todd Birnie. Described as exuding "the ingratiating optimism characteristic of all Canadians" (36), the Sprout "sometimes gives us little salutes when he sees us in the hall. Lately he's been flashing the peace sign. Sixty-five percent of the time he acts like he's our friend but we should remember the saying: *Friends don't fire friends*" (4). The narrator goes on to note that the Sprout "used to be almost normal to talk to," but has lately taken to adopting managerial idioms, such as the phrase, "*I gave you a carrot, but I also need to show you the stick*" (4, 5). The Sprout is apparently aware that this particular phrase

"sounds a little sadistic" but is sure to tell his employees that he does not mean to use it in such a way (5). It is implied in this passage that the Sprout has changed with the onset of restructuring within the company, Park establishing in micro-format a causal historical relationship between the late-century corporate culture of downsizing and the adoption of supposedly people-friendly managerial styles, a causality that Ehrenreich also illuminates in *Smile or Die*. Ehrenreich notes in her book the curious incident of the motivational industry's growth immediately following the 1980s turn to downsizing as a norm in corporate cultures. "Between 1981 and 2003," she writes, "about thirty million full-time American workers lost their jobs in corporate downsizings" (114). In response to the malaise this culture imposed upon employees, Ehrenreich writes about the new "approach to management based on motivation, mood boosting, and positive thinking" (113). Park makes this connection even clearer in the following section describing the office's softball team. The narrator tells us:

> Softball is a morale-boosting carrot that the Sprout most likely has read about in a handbook or learned at that seminar he goes to every March. Morale has been low since the Firings began last year. Pru says *morale* is a word thrown around only in the context of its absence. (5)

In the wake of the office's low morale, the Sprout introduces a team-building exercise, another approach to subtle managerial motivation outlined by Ehrenreich. In her analysis, downsizing "mak[es] a mockery of the team concept," so managers step in to urge their employees "to find camaraderie and a sense of collective purpose at the microlevel of the 'team'" (120). Among his numerous attempts to cheer up his employees, the Sprout once held regular "mental health seminars," which had the unintended effect of making the employees "depressed, even violent—Laars once punched the wall by the bulletin board so hard that his hand has never been the same"

(9). When Laars confronts the Sprout about the recent firings of Jenny and Jack II, the Sprout responds with empty phrases like, "*Think of the office as a work in progress*," and, "*I'm not one to point fingers*," and finally, "*I'm as upset as you are*" (149). The strict, rational manager under the Taylorist model is replaced in the novel by the more presently recognizable friendly manager closer in form to the ideal manager under Elton Mayo's model, one who wants always to remain in good favor with his subordinates.[10]

The nature of the company at which these characters work is never made clear, but it is suggested by the history Park provides of the firm that the purpose of this ambiguity is to represent the novel's office as a sort of every-office, a universal entity in the 21st century whose history mimics the history of the American corporation. The company at which the characters work used to be a standalone entity, "founded long ago by men with mustaches" (17). Then it seems it grew into a multi-branch corporation and became "the easternmost arm of an Omaha-based octopus," surely a reference to Frank Norris's classic anti-trust novel, *The Octopus*, in which the then-modern monopoly was imagined as an octopus that has extended the reach of its many arms into all aspects of life and control over local and national governments (17). "The tentacles eventually detached," the narrator of *Personal Days* informs us, "or strangled each other, a few of them joining forces, most dying out altogether" (17). The language here could also apply to the individuals working at the company in the present moment of the novel, who

[10] Frederick Winslow Taylor introduced the business world to a mechanized form of labor in his book, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). According to Cristina M Giannantonio and Amy E. Hurley-Hanson, in their introduction to a special centennial issue evaluating Taylor's work, Taylor's "process of scientifically studying work to increase worker and organizational efficiency" has had a lasting impact on industrial management techniques (7). Elton Mayo was famously tasked in 1929 with overseeing worker productivity at the Hawthorne Electric Company in Chicago, a company that ran according to Taylor's principles of scientific management. Mayo experimented instead with his own therapeutic approach to management, finding considerable success, which he detailed in the 1933 book, *The Social Problems of Industrial Civilization*. Both Illouz and Stephen Binkley, in their individual studies of emotional capitalism, credit Mayo with kickstarting an emotional turn in capitalist workplaces. Alex Carey is highly critical of Mayo's report on methodological grounds, arguing that Mayo's arguments were "nearly devoid of scientific merit" (403).

compete in order to stay employed and ultimately stay alive. Now, however, there are rumors that "some Californians" are attempting to take over the company (17). The narrator preemptively—but only temporarily—wards off the paranoia that might attend thoughts of new ownership: "*Think positive*, we tell ourselves. There's no reason to believe that a new owner will be any worse than the current one. But when have things ever gotten better?" (18). Their positive reassurance is shown here to be highly anxious and insincere.

The workers seem to live in a state of perpetual anxiety and paranoia, signaled by recurring conspiracy theories about the nature and future of "the Firings." In the employees' imaginations, otherwise inconsequential occurrences take on the quality of cosmic significance. The narrator tells us:

> We know the Firings were just a taste of what's in store, and […] we anticipate their return. If something ominous happens—nasty memo, Coke machine empty two days in a row—we see it as a sign of our new owners' impending arrival. (18)

One of the employees imagines that Maxine, on whom seemingly everybody in the office has a crush and who it is believed is actually the Sprout's boss, has files on every one of the employees, ready for reference when the next batch of firings is due. Another of the employees, Pru, "imagines files full of closed-circuit footage from tiny cameras hidden in our monitors" (41). There is a running theory that the recent layoffs coincide with the first letters of people's names, the first batch of ex-employees having names that start with "J" (27). There is also a theory that people are fired directly after receiving praise from the Sprout. "Someone's stock rises," the narrator tells us, "and we all feel envious for a couple weeks. Then that person gets axed, or is made so miserable that there's no option but to quit" (26). Constant throughout the novel is the sense that behaviors and moods change in direct relation to the anxiety of precarity,

an encapsulation of a sort of corporatist governmentality. Workers perform heroically without the demand for higher pay, seemingly happy just to keep their jobs, and they adopt an attitude of intense competitiveness. They receive what one character refers to as a "deprotion," described as "a promotion that shares most of the hallmarks of a demotion" (27). Crease, who absorbed Jason's responsibilities upon the latter's firing, keeps count of how long it takes him to travel from his desk to Jason's former desk, a task made necessary by the difficulty—and time sink—of offloading all of Jason's files onto Crease's own computer (22). In this example, Park showcases the manner in which workers in the contemporary precarious workplace internalize what was formerly external under the Taylorist model of management at the turn of the 20th century. In a striking example of governmentality, Crease is shown here to internalize his own optimization in a way that is not directly overseen by his superiors. Evident throughout the novel is a patent unease. Anxieties are raised by weird line-spacing in one character's updated resume, signaling both that the workers at this company are already preemptively preparing for their forced departure as if it is inevitable, and also that the scarcity of jobs outside of the workplace that serves as the novel's only setting is such that simple line-spacing errors have the ability to induce seemingly extreme stress (31).

The characters handle the stress of their precarity in different ways. One character, Jack II, so named due to the previous employment of another man named Jack, walks around the office giving unsolicited backrubs that the other employees refer to as Jackrubs (13-4). Jenny has her own personal life coach, about whom she does not want the others to know. Lizzie, who has been "out of sorts these days, […] is between therapists right now" (19). Laars is described as having once been "full of pep, but we managed to squeeze it out of him" (21). The narrator reveals:

> Most of us are in therapy. Occasionally one of us will quit for a while, laughably convinced we are better, before realizing there's no such thing as *better*. Haven't we learned that by now? Nothing will ever get better, nothing will ever be fixed. Fixing is not even the point. *What is the point?* (42-3)

All the characters in Park's novel take it upon themselves to correct the negative moods that have arisen as a result of the stressful work environment. They have, in Mark Fisher's words, internalized the neoliberal "*privatization of stress*," a naturalization of mental illness that diverts attention from any institutional causes of that illness (19). Though Park does a good job of representing workplace anxiety within the precarious office, he also introduces the caveat that his characters ultimately make light of their precarious stations; that is, they assign meaning to their precarity such that it does not appear as precarity at all or as such but rather as an *opportunity*. Park illustrates in the novel what David Neilson concludes in his study of subjective responses to workplace precarization. He writes, "Circumstantial precarity correlates with anxiety, but the relationship is complex because people often quell anxiety by denying precarity" (184). Arriving at a similar insight, Park suggests that a particular form of positive thinking is responsible for this denial.

Common among all the employees' coping techniques is a narrativization of their future firing. All the characters construct their own personal "layoff narratives," stories of their time at the company and their impending firings that construct a positive progression of events, a narrative arc of upward mobility. One character explains it like this:

> The idea is that you look back on your period of employment, highlight all the abuses suffered, tally the lessons gained, and use these negatives and positives to mentally

> withstand what you anticipate will be a series of events culminating in expulsion. You look to termination as rebirth, liberation, an expansion of horizons. (82)

This narrative construction represents positive thinking of a sort, the product of anxiety, the desperate hope that things happen for a reason. It is borne of the hope that being fired might be something of a stepping stone, a "rebirth," as the narrator puts it, rather than simply a kind of death with nothing else around the corner. These layoff narratives are similar in kind to the conspiracy theories the employees concoct. The characters narrativize because it gives a sense of order to what is otherwise a chaotic world. It brings consolation. Narrativity is shown in the novel to be itself a kind of positive thinking, a teleology informed by a therapeutic culture's common narrative of the triumphant individual. Ordering existence necessarily imposes meaning upon it. This ordering offers some comfort to the precarious workers, even if it is shown to be highly fraught and anxious.

The layoff narratives, in their search for narrative hopefulness, echo the approach of the motivational industry toward downsizing that Ehrenreich identifies and traces. Rather than "repair this new reality" of employment precarity, the motivational industry "offer[ed] to change how one *thought* about it, insisting that corporate restructuring was an exhilaratingly progressive 'change' to be embraced, that job loss presented an opportunity for self-transformation" (115). The order the characters impose on their insecure lives is similar in form to the order that Park himself imposes on the first two sections of his novel. Through the use of headings to break apart small chunks of narrative in the first part of the novel, to the use of headings along with roman numerals in the second part of the novel, Park orders what ultimately reads as chaotic and laden with anxiety. The form is contradictory to the content, but this contradiction is actually key to understanding the content. As their lives become more disorderly, as the narrative progresses

from the fear of layoffs in the first part to the actual event of layoffs in the second part, attempts at order become more desperate. This part of the novel, titled "Replace All," is broken down into headings and subheadings, within which are chunks of narrative each given their own subordinate roman numeral identifications: one such subordinate subheading reads, "II (B) ii (b) 4.3," followed by three short paragraphs of text (99). The novel as a whole is characterized by a struggle for order in the midst of chaos, and it illustrates this by mobilizing what have become conventions of workplace precarity fictions.

A staple in workplace precarity fictions is faith in the lottery to secure one's future.[11] The narrator tells us that the "long-term strategy" for both Lizzie and Pru is to be discovered and married by "a handsome Swedish baron" (34); other than that, they also hope to win the lottery. Following this passage is a short paragraph given its own headline: "The lottery." It reads: "We all play the lottery. We buy our tickets individually because we don't want to have to divvy up all that loot in case the numbers come up right" (34). Park shows us in his novel the various ways that individuals default to hope when caught up within dire circumstances. If hope does appear in the novel as a natural pre-cognitive response to hopelessness, Park suggests that corporations in no small part capitalize on hope's utility for keeping workers working. In his example of the lottery as an institutional—albeit artificial—buoy of hope, Park aligns himself with the sociological theory of Clotfelter and Cook, who argue in their groundbreaking 1990 study of American state lotteries that these games of chance serve the purpose of "selling hope" to the economically disadvantaged populace.[12] It is significant that the narrator specifies that the

[11] The lottery as an avenue towards class mobility is a major plot point in Saunders's short story "The Semplica Girl Diaries," wherein the protagonist miraculously wins ten thousand dollars from a lottery ticket, with the expectation that this will turn things around for him and his family, only for those dreams to be dashed mere pages later when the family incurs a severe debt.

[12] In his review of Clotfelter and Cook's book, H. Roy Kaplan points out the American "obsession" with state-run lotteries since their reintroduction by New Hampshire in 1964, a decade that—I would argue, not coincidentally—saw the circulation of neoliberal ideas in American politics (Kaplan 711). For a more favorable analysis of the

characters all play the lottery separately. Park illustrates rather directly here the lack of any sense of collectivity among workers who would be stronger both in the workplace and in the lottery as a unit. Despite the fact that the characters are narrated here as a collective, they can only imagine themselves as isolated individuals.

Another staple of workplace precarity fictions, the evaluation form, also makes an appearance in Park's novel.[13] The heading for the section about the self-evaluation forms ironically reads, "It's OK to relax" (23). The forms began in an anonymous fashion, leading many of the employees to treat them like jokes, but it is assumed that the onset of the Firings led the Sprout to treat them more seriously, morphing the form into "a three-page packet" that requires the individual's name (23). At the end of the evaluation form is an essay section, on which most of the workers spend "ninety soul-searching minutes" (24). The sole exception is Jill, who leaves the section entirely blank. When she is eventually fired, after a relocation to the mostly uninhabited Siberia floor, it is suggested that her noncompliance with the terms of the evaluation form is the reason. This suggests a revision of Melville's short story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), in which the eponymous scrivener refuses suddenly to do the work asked of him with the banal statement, "I would prefer not to." In that story, Bartleby's boss identifies in some way with his obstinate worker, neglecting at any point to actually fire him, even if the boss does relocate Bartleby's workplace. For Park, the contemporary naturalization of layoffs prevents any identification between management and employees, and though Jill is moved around just as Bartleby is, her fate is far more guaranteed than his own. As Ivor Southwood

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lottery and the reasons people participate in it, see McCaffrey's "Why People Play Lotteries and Why It Matters" (1994).

[13] A representative example of this staple is Saunders's story, "Pastoralia," in which the workers are made to fill out evaluation forms not for themselves but for their coworkers. In that story, the drama unfolds as the protagonist is pressured by his manager to provide a negative evaluation form for his irreverent coworker, as the company cannot fire her without the protagonist's statement.

writes in an account of his own previous insecure employment, “The temptation to refuse to take part in this bleak pantomime [filling out evaluation forms] was overruled by the impulse for survival” (2).

About halfway through the novel, Jill is fired, and among the possessions she leaves behind is a notebook filled with what the employees believe are quotes from managerial and self-help books. One character believes this mosaic of quotes, titled by Jill *The Jilliad*, was the result of Jill’s anxious attempts to get her career “back on track” (120). He imagines it as a step in her self-management toward securing her employment above and beyond her colleagues. One entry in the book reads:

> *This you must know: Your colleagues are your most irreplaceable assets. Treat them like you would the hammer, awl, and clamp in your tool kit.*
>
> —*Every Worker’s War Chest,* by Fred Glass (122)

After reading a dozen entries, the employees get the idea that Jill was in fact cataloguing these quotes satirically, “taking a buzz saw to the rules, pointing out the absurd contradictions, the glib b.s. of corporate culture” (127). I would argue that this is exactly what Park is trying to do in his novel. It is later discovered that all the quotes and sources in *The Jilliad* are “pure invention,” the inevitable result—some of the employees speculate—of Jill’s boredom and isolation in Siberia (175). As such, *The Jilliad* can no longer be sold as a found art object, the workers’ original intention for Jill’s book.

At the end of the novel, in a run-on monologue sentence upwards of 40 pages long, it is revealed to the reader that some of the more insidious conspiracy theories about the Firings were true all along. By showing some of the employees’ conspiracy theories to actually be true, Park attests to the rational character of their irrational sense-making. He is saying in the final section

that, if the world does seem sinister, this might be due to the fact that it actually is. All the characters, in their distrust of their superiors and the corporate system itself, have adopted a predilection for seeing the perceptually occluded negativity in the world around them that usually goes unnoticed. Park ends his novel with an appeal to interpersonal communication. The third part of *Personal Days* is an e-mail from Jonah to Pru that fails to send, written as one long, run-on sentence, because "the period key on this dilapidated craptop gave out completely" (195). Jonah, who has risen through the ranks in the company, is apparently the only one left at the office, except for the Sprout and Grime—an enigmatic character who passes himself off as a fellow employee for much of the novel, only to be revealed in the third part as a contracted restructuring expert. The third section of the novel involves Jonah explaining to Pru what he has discovered about the nature of the layoffs and specifically the role Grime has played in them. For Jonah, his email "was as much about imagining I was saying something to you as it was about actually saying anything" (241). Frank Norris famously ends *The Octopus*, a largely cynical book about the growing role of monopolies in America, with the progressivist line, "The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good" (652). Park, however, cannot bring himself to conclude his novel with Norris's optimism. In essence, the ending of Park's novel is a lone survivor of workplace downsizing delivering a monologue into the void. For Park, collective visions of the possible are *im*possible because economic forces are simply too strong. Though the novel deploys humor throughout, it does not follow the conventional story arc of a comedy. By the end of the novel, nobody is left at the company, and it is unclear what their fates are after being laid off.

Interpersonal Days: The Collective, the Other, and Narratives of Progress in Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*

Then We Came to the End and *Personal Days*, two novels set in similar spaces, dealing with similar issues, and voiced from similar points of view, have much in common on the level of content and form. Both novels accept the paradoxical premise that working on a "team" does not indicate any group unity. "We were fractious and overpaid" (3), Ferris's novel begins. Just as in *Personal Days*, the workers in Ferris's novel lose contact with those who have been let go. "They had been let go. They packed their things. They left us for good, never to return" (24). Also as in *Personal Days*, the office workers in *Then We Came to the End* almost all suffer from depression. "We fought with depression," the narrator tells us. "One thing or another in our lives hadn't worked out, and for a long period of time we struggled to overcome it […] Finally we consulted HR about the details of seeing a specialist, and the specialist prescribed medication" (57). As with Park's novel, some characters in Ferris's novel express their existential anguish with casual attire. Carl Garbedian, who is discovered later in the novel to be clinically depressed, "wore off-brand, too-tight jeans and generic tennis shoes, which, to us, conveyed the extent to which he'd given up" (59). Signs of emotional capitalism abound in Ferris's novel, including the iconic company t-shirt obligatorily adorned with the firm's logo. The narrator reports, "The shirt was for some team event and everyone wore it out of company pride" (10). Ferris's office workers also receive, and desire, what Park refers to in *Personal Days* as "deprotions." The narrator of *Then We Came to the End* tells us, "We had one thing still going for us: the prospect of a promotion. A new title: true, it came with no money, the power was almost always illusory, the bestowal a cheap shrewd device concocted by management to keep us from mutiny" (110).

Then We Came to the End also develops some of the more latent elements of *Personal Days,* specifically an existential reading of precarity. Whereas Park's novel focuses mainly on the economic base of precarious anxiety, Ferris engages with the mortal elements expressed in the anxiety of precarious employment. Firings are consistently described in *Then We Came to the End* in mortal terms. While being interrogated by the office coordinator about his possession of the now-fired Tom's bookshelves, Chris Yop reasons to the group, "I mean, the body's not even cold yet, and she's standing in my doorway accusing me of stealing?" (29) The common euphemism for describing someone's firing is, "Walking Spanish down the hall," supposedly pulled from the Tom Waits song, "Walking Spanish" (35). In that song, Waits uses the phrase to describe someone arriving at the site of his execution. The group tracks down the source of the phrase, which dates back to the pirates "on the Spanish Main," who would "lift their captives by the scruff of the neck and make them walk with their toes barely touching the deck," presumably to the plank off of which they would then be made to jump (35). Ferris's emphasis on the existential element of precarity can be seen to connect two otherwise disconnected theoretical approaches to the term *precarity*. There is, on one side, the Bourdieuvian—or economically oriented—account of precarity, which traces the contemporary phenomenon of unstable and insecure employment as a result of the neoliberalization of the economy. On the other side is the Butlerian—or existential—account of precarity, after the scholar Judith Butler, who argues in *Precarious Life* that humanity's shared exposure to mortality should open up a site of commonality that resists the temptation of violence and war. Though *Then We Came to the End* juxtaposes the two scholarly approaches to "precarity," I will argue that it favors an existential account rather than an economic one. For Ferris's part, the class divisions that characterize Park's novel of precarity are less important than the shared vulnerability toward death, which in

his account—as theorized by Butler herself—can act as a source for collectivity. *Then We Came to the End* begins with class analysis and ends with existentialism.

Ferris illustrates in the opening chapter of the novel the contingent nature of the employees' positivity and the manner in which it echoes historical patterns. "We believed that downturns had been rendered obsolete by the ingenious technology of the new economy," the narrator notes. "We thought ourselves immune from things like plant closings in Iowa and Nebraska, where remote Americans struggled against falling-in roofs and credit card debt" (18). Ferris is establishing here a historical trajectory of layoffs in American culture from normal occurrences in blue-collar industries to more contemporary intrusions into the once-secure white-collar workplace. This also substantiates what numerous critics refer to when they look at the precarity of white-collar office jobs as nothing substantially new, as novel only because they are affecting people who thought themselves immune. Millar points out that many contemporary accounts of precarity betray the hallmarks of privilege. She writes, "Precarity appears new and exceptional only from the perspective of Western Europe and other highly industrialized countries, where the Fordist-Keynesian social contract was strongest in the years following the Second World War" (6). Even Mills registered a similar view toward mid-century white-collar malaise. After pointing out that the mid-century white-collar worker was experiencing the same troubles as the rest of the population, Mills writes, "If these troubles seem particularly bitter to the new middle strata, perhaps that is because for a brief time these people felt themselves immune to troubles" (xv). Ferris is also concerned with an upper-middle-class positive thinking different in kind from Saunders's destitute yes-men or Park's underpaid workers, forced by way of survival to put on a smile and adopt a positive attitude. In *Then We Came to the End*, the positive outlook is earned from a relatively comfortable and stable existence. The workers in

Ferris's novel are only exposed to blue-collar woes by way of television, presumably on news channels. By virtue of this medium, with its display of "dislocated work programs, readjustment and retraining services, and skills workshops," the office workers are able to conclude about the blue-collar workers' fates, "They'd be fine," a view entirely out of touch with the reality of blue-collar downsizing (19). Because their positivity is highly contingent on their continued success as a class, however, Ferris illustrates through the rest of the novel what happens when the apparatus upholding their optimism is toppled.

Ferris begins his novel in a positive tone entirely opposite to the overarching tone of the novel, a positivity premised on the previous security his office workers once experienced. The narrator tells the reader, "We didn't have much patience for cynics. Everyone was a cynic at one point or another but it did us little good to bemoan our unbelievable fortunes. At the national level things had worked out pretty well in our favor and entrepreneurial cash was easy to come by" (7-8). Appeals to historical progress are often triumphalist in nature and certainly function implicitly if not explicitly as a means of quashing any kind of conversation about the ills of modern life. The narrator reports in defense of their group's optimistic disposition, "Crime was at an all-time low and we heard accounts of former welfare recipients holding steady jobs" (8). The end to which the characters came in the novel's title is described in its opening chapter as the dot-com bubble crash at the turn of the 21st century. Before the crash, "The world was flush with Internet cash and we got our fair share of it" (12). This personal and national wealth led the office workers to the optimistic conclusion that "it would never end" (12). "It was lasting fun," the narrator tells us, "until layoffs came" (16). The change in tone from the first chapter to the rest of the novel perfectly captures what Mark Fisher describes as the symbolically bi-polar nature of capitalism. "With its ceaseless boom and bust cycles," Fisher writes, "capitalism is

itself fundamentally and irreducibly bi-polar, periodically lurching between hyped-up mania (the irrational exuberance of 'bubble thinking') and depressive come-down" (35). This "bi-polar" quality is captured in the oscillation of the narrative from negative to positive perceptions, and the positive thinking the narrator deploys in the description of the characters' pre-layoff wealth is merely what Fisher describes here as "bubble thinking," a consequence of their good fortune. The narrator tells us, "It was fun, imagining our eventual despair. It was also despairing" (17). This is soon after corrected with the positive spin, "Yet we were still alive, we had to remember that. The sun still shone in as we sat at our desks" (17). The use of the words "yet" and "still" here is experienced as a grammatical correction of emotional deviancy, a necessary continuation and correction of a thought whose previous conclusion was deemed unsatisfactory.

The workers are employed at an advertising agency in Chicago, and Ferris makes clear that the industry itself, along with the threat of downsizing, turns everyone into a competitive individualist. The workers interpret the layoffs of their coworkers as "self-sacrifice" in the service of the collective: "They left, so that we might stay" (19). This meaning-making, however, is just more positive thinking. In reality, the departure of their coworkers signifies nothing other than the precarity of the remaining workers. Further, this collective sense of the greater good betrays a more pervasive sense throughout Ferris's novel that any kind of camaraderie between the office workers is tenuous at best, especially amidst layoffs. This level of competition is also revealed to be embedded within the logic of the advertising enterprise. In response to the creative success of one copywriter, the narrator reveals that "the real engine running the place is the primal desire to kill. To be the best ad person in the building, to inspire jealousy, to defeat all the rest. The threat of layoffs just made it a more efficient machine" (109). Between Park's novel and Ferris's own, this is the most explicit alignment of layoffs with a project of governmentality.

If competition was already inherent to the creative industry, layoffs make the consequences for losing that competition more ruthless. By threatening losing parties with expulsion from the office, layoffs create "a more efficient machine," a work ethic governed by the individual's responsibility for his own precarity. For the collective group, intra-office competition sounds a death knell: as Bourdieu writes, "Competition for work tends to generate a struggle of all against all, which destroys all the values of solidarity and humanity" ("Job Insecurity" 84). This struggle, and its individualizing structure, acts in the novel as the epicenter for a bridging of the Bourdieuvian and Butlerian analysis of precarity. If workplace precarity tends to extinguish connections between workers to the point of a quasi-warlike free-for-all, the novel illustrates how this might be avoided in favor of an enhanced collectivity. First, though, Ferris shows the reader, through the characterization of a particularly volatile individual, how individualization via precarity *can* play out.

Tom Mota's depression is expressed in Ferris's novel as a form of anger immediately identifiable to the consumer of popular media at the turn of the 21st century. The narrator tells us, "When Tom found out he was being let go, he wanted to throw his computer against his office window" (15). Tom is depicted in *Then We Came to the End* as an Emersonian individualist, quoting frequently from the American thinker's texts, as well as gifting a book of collected essays to another office worker. For Tom, the modern office, with its conforming structures, stultifies the kind of individualism described by Emerson: or, as he puts it, Emerson—along with his contemporary, Walt Whitman—"wouldn't have lasted two minutes in this place" (86).[14] Tom is Peter Gibbons in *Office Space* (1999), alienated from his true self by the humdrum of office

[14] As Alison Russell puts it in her essay on the novel, Ferris "captures perfectly how contemporary cubicle workers are torn between the satisfaction of being a part of 'the team' and the Emersonian (and very American) directive to be, above all, a nonconformist—that individual who should rise above coworkers to distinguish himself or herself as exceptional, if not simply different" (319).

life, the bureaucratic hoops dreamed up by his sadistic boss, and the soul-crushing immateriality of white-collar labor. He is William Foster in *Falling Down* (1993), recently laid off from his job as an engineer in the defense industry and terrorizing Los Angeles in a confused rage. Tom's return near the end of the novel is experienced by the reader and the characters alike as a return of the repressed, that element of the downsized office that has been shucked, the fat that has been trimmed. He returns as a terrorist, and later he joins the army to fight in the War on Terror. This connection between precarious employment and the War on Terror perfectly recalls Butler's conception of precarity. For Butler, the point of departure for her analysis is the reaction by the United States to the 9/11 terror attacks. Where, for Butler, the United States could have responded to its exposure to violence by recognizing the ways in which it has subjected other countries to a similar violence, forming a kind of global interdependence, instead George W. Bush launched a sustained war with dubious premises and an undefined goal.[15] Against Butler's ideal response to precarity, however, Tom embodies the inclination toward isolationism and violence. He succumbs to the belief that "mourning can only be resolved through violence" (Butler xix).

Tom's anger obscures a naïve optimism that serves as his anger's foundation. At bottom, Tom is nostalgic for an Emersonian American past that never really existed, a time when men were men and people could exist authentically. This agrarian longing was identified 60 years before Ferris's novel in Mills's account of white-collar nostalgia. Mills argues that the white-collar worker of the mid-century responded to his declining class power by looking back at the

[15] Butler laments the missed opportunity on the part of the United States to mourn its loss and form solidarity over this mourning. She writes, "It was my sense in the fall of 2001 that the United States was missing an opportunity to redefine itself as part of a global community when, instead, it heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights, and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship" (xi). Butler writes that "the dislocation from First World privilege, however temporary, offers a chance to start to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community" (xii-xiii).

romantic figure of the rural 19th-century frontiersman. For Mills, "the most cherished national images are sentimental versions of historical types that no longer exist, if indeed they ever did" (xiii). Quoting A. M. Schlesinger, Mills identifies this mythic American man with the agrarian dream of the "long tutelage of the soil" (xiii). In Tom's character, Ferris gives the reader an anachronistic transplant from the 1950s to illustrate the history of white-collar malaise. Tom explicitly expresses nostalgia for 1950s era white-collar work when "General Motors, […] IBM, and Madison Avenue establish[ed] postwar American might upon the two-martini lunch" (116). Tom is caught up in what Timothy Melley refers to as "agency panic," a concern in mid-century sociological accounts of office work that the individual was losing any sense of power or individuality in the conformist structures of office life (Melley 48). Tom's escapist dream is thus to return to his pre-modern American roots and work the land as a landscaper, a dream Carl actually takes up and turns into a business.

Out of all the depressed characters in the novel, Carl Garbedian receives the most attention. The reader is introduced to Carl's depression when he is in his wife's car outside of the office and proceeds to strip down in a fit of refusal to go into work, a battle he eventually loses (62-6). When Tom finally informs Carl's wife, Marilynn, of Carl's depression, the narrator summarizes the odd behavior that led Tom to tell her, most of which the reader is already familiar with. One detail, however, that was not known previously, which is apparently the reason that Tom decides to go to Carl's wife, is that Tom walked in on Carl sitting at his desk and staring, with "an almost scientific expression," at his hand "as if it were a rare find or a foreign object" (143). This is almost certainly a reference to G.E. Moore's "Here is one hand" epistemological argument in refutation of philosophical skepticism, which he articulated in an essay titled "Proof of an External World" (1939). Against the skeptical argument that we cannot

be absolutely certain of an external world, Moore argues that common sense dictates otherwise. He argues that the external world and objects therein could be proven by first raising his right hand and saying, "Here is one hand," and then raising his left hand and saying, "and here is another" (166).[16] Ferris suggests in this reference to Moore that precarity induces an ontological uncertainty, a despair that fundamentally disconnects the individual from the world. This despair, embodied in Carl's depression, turns the individual in on himself, creating an individualism characterized by solipsism.[17]

The former coworkers meet for the final time in the novel at a reading of their colleague Hank Neary's published novel. His novel, it is revealed during the reading, includes the portion in *Then We Came to the End* about Lynn Mason, a section in the middle of the novel upwards of thirty pages in length describing, from a more traditional third-person narrative perspective, Lynn's silent battle with breast cancer. Initially a "small, angry book about work," Hank's new, published book is a repudiation of that cynicism, and in that way it clearly parallels Ferris's own affective pursuit (374). At the end of the novel, it is revealed that nearly everybody survived their layoffs intact. "We had spread out across the industry," the narrator tells us, "finding work at other agencies" (358). The reader is informed that "the colors of the corporate logos were all new and different, but the song and dance remained the same" (359). In fact, in an upbeat tone characteristic of the bright-sided positive thinker, the narrator spins the layoffs as an opportunity for reinvention. Starting at a new workplace allows the workers to present themselves differently from how they were in their old jobs: "Wasn't that part of the promise of America?" the narrator asks rhetorically (359). If layoff narratives are treated with suspicion in *Personal Days*, Ferris

[16] Ludwig Wittgenstein was evidently intrigued by Moore's argument, taking notes in support of it in journals that were posthumously published as a book, *On Certainty* (1969).
[17] The idea that depression leads to solipsism is put forward in a contemporary literary setting in much of David Foster Wallace's fiction, notably *Infinite Jest* (1996) and "The Depressed Person."

seems fully committed to the telos they suggest. It might be an overstatement to say that this cheery conclusion stubbornly negates all the emotional turmoil described earlier in the novel; at the very least, however, we are led to believe that there are no lasting consequences for the period of layoffs about which the novel previously seemed so concerned. As Ralph Clare puts it, "we never really 'come to the end' in Ferris's novel. Capitalism's *longue durée* still happily rules the day" (189). What Clare describes here is dramatized in the ending of the novel itself, as the group of former colleagues slowly whittles down.

> Most of us followed them out soon after, and in the end, last call was announced […] But we didn't want the night to end. We kept hanging on, waiting for them to send over the big guy who'd force us out with a final command. And we would leave, eventually. Out to the parking lot, a few parting words. (385)

In his slowly spiraling deferred ending, Ferris captures the effect of his novel as a potential critique of the forces of precarity: if the novel begins as a heartbreaking tale of precarious subjectivity, it ends as a capitulation to economic forces. For Ferris, job loss is as symptomatic of wage labor as the ending is of a novel: eventually it strikes. This naturalization, however, ignores the social construction of precarity and even accepts the neoliberal premise that precarity is harmless: precarity is less a threat than it is simply a fact.

Despite the "we" narrator that represents this cast of precarious workers, the "we" Ferris is really attempting to harness in his novel is the relationship between the writer/narrator and the reader. Ferris's novel begins with the provocative chapter title, "You Don't Know What's in My Heart" (3). The use of "You" and "My" rather than "Our" here punctuates the novel's emphasis upon an interpersonal connection rather than a *collective* connection. If this is the problem posed at the beginning of the novel, Ferris attempts to resolve it in the end. The concluding lines of the

novel, when all the individual former colleagues have departed from the bar, read, “We were the only two left. Just the two of us, you and me” (385). It is clear from the language used here, as well as the description of coworkers parting ways, that the “you and me” evoked in the passage are the reader and the writer/narrator, with the intended effect being a closing of the affective distance between self and other described in the novel’s opening chapter title—an amelioration of the former claim that we, the readers, do not know what is in the heart of the narrator. Citing this ending, Adam Kelly writes in his 2017 essay on formal conventionalism in contemporary American fiction, “even texts that take contemporary institutions or forms of political collectivity as their subject matter often end by emphasizing the interpersonal, as if unmediated access to the consciousness of the other were the primary goal of the literary act” (53). If the novel sets up the expectation, with its evocative use of the first-person plural point of view, that its concerns are collective, close reading reveals a more concerted interest in interpersonal communication.

At the center of the novel is an advertisement the workers have been commissioned to create, pro bono, for a breast cancer awareness group. Eventually Joe Pope tells them that the assignment is no longer an advertisement for a fundraiser but rather an advertisement in which they are “talking directly to the sick person. And our objective […] is to make them laugh” (175). Upon being questioned by his confused subordinates what it is they, as advertisers, are selling, Joe says, “Okay, if we’re selling something, we’re selling comfort and hope to the cancer patient through the power of laughter” (176). When Jim Jackers contacts his great-uncle Max about the assignment, he forgets that Max’s deceased wife died of breast cancer. Max’s response to Jim’s request for help is, “But there ain’t nothing funny about it […] that I ever saw” (191). This smaller narrative echoes the structure of the novel as a whole. By the end, Jim manages to come up with a few cheesy advertisements, which he shows to Lynn at the hospital. The idea is

that the advertisers, though they cannot cure cancer, can still make the sufferer feel a little bit better. This seems to be the idea behind Ferris's depiction of modern office life. It may be dull and unbearable at times, but there is a lot of humor to be found in it. As such, Ferris's novel features a structural arc opposite to Park's own, an upward arc characteristic of a comic narrative. If Park's novel begins as comedy and ends as tragedy, Ferris's begins as tragedy and ends as comedy. The comic arc mirrors the narrative logics of positive thinking, the Panglossian notion that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, that everything moves ceaselessly forward. If a comedy generally ends with a marriage, positive thinking ends with a smile, and this is how Ferris structures his own narrative. In a nod to the conventions of the comic genre, Ferris includes as an aside in the ending of his novel that "Benny and Marcia announced that they were getting married in the fall" (375).

What is odd about Ferris's novel is that it presents itself as a downsizing narrative, but it is truly a vindication of white-collar labor. After Hank's reading, the narrator realizes, "The funny thing about work itself, it was so bearable" (376). In reminiscing with Hank, "we talked of regrets and of old times and happily recalled that not all had been misery" (376). To some degree, Ferris is right to resist the reactionary impulse against all forms of labor simply because labor under neoliberal capitalism is anxious and fraught. To do so would cede the ground of work to neoliberalism altogether. It is of course true that work can and should be a positive experience. It is true that working in an office setting can create communities of people with nothing otherwise in common. What Ferris does, however, in his concluding valorization of work, is normalize the precarity that occupies the other 300 or more pages of the novel. Downsizing becomes a natural process that is existentially debilitating, but for the novel this existential treatment cannot function as a critique in itself of the status of labor under neoliberal

capitalism. Ferris's concerns are more existential than they are economic or political. While he conveys movingly "what precarity does," in Millar's parlance, he leaves out entirely "what precarity is" and certainly what precarity signifies, as well as the potentiality for systemic change embedded within precarity's reality (5).

Ferris and Park set up an expectation with their use of first-person plural narration that they, in their own ways, disappoint by the ends of their respective novels. *First-person plural*, the channeling of many voices into a single focalized narrativization, mimics in form the union entity; it is, in Natalya Bekhta's study of *Then We Came to the End*, "narration by collective subjectivity" (165). This sense of collectivity, both at work and at home, has been severely diminished in the last several decades, a trend well documented by Richard Sennett in his study of alienation under "the new capitalism," *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), as well as by Robert D. Putnam in his book on the decline of communities in the late-20th century, *Bowling Alone* (2000). In his book, Sennett refers to the first-person plural perspective as "the dangerous pronoun," as it represents a negation of all that neoliberal individualism has sought to naturalize (136).[18] If neoliberalism has radically individualized what was already innately internal and individual about positive thinking, a radical political program might still emerge that repurposes the power of positive thinking to vocalize singularly a collective utopian imagination through the first-person plural. Is it not possible, contra Millar, that the *making-precarious* of formerly stable employment at a range of levels does in fact signal the possibility for change, for collective imagination from very different economic classes that have at least one thing in common? White-collar precarity has the opportunity to shock the formerly comfortable PMC from its

[18] Sennett also predicted, quite presciently, that the communal longing arising from neoliberalism's specific form of individualization can bring about a resurgence of tribalism and nationalism, a phenomenon particularly evident in the post-2016 environment (138-9).

illusions about capitalism. Their comfort is in fact a zombie left over from the Fordist capitalism that struggles to remain, a relic from the past that neoliberal economics promises to make extinct. This move, however, could open the collective eye to the Real of capitalism: that it is inherently unstable and precarious, and if stability is the desire, then a move away from capitalism toward something else becomes only logical.

Isabell Lorey senses the possibilities suggested by widespread employment insecurity. For Lorey, being made precarious puts the individual in the position of taking responsibility for his or her own financial security. This is the biopolitical quality of neoliberal precarity: by limiting the individual's security, capital can ensure that the individual has internalized his or her own self-regulation. But Lorey sees this governmental responsibility as an opportunity for change: "the possibility arises at the same time of being able to leave and start something new: the potentiality of exodus and constituting" (105). In narratological terms, Park's and Ferris's novels exemplify what Alan Palmer has coined the *social mind* in literature; that is, they illustrate in very creative ways the manner in which groups of people come to understand each other's thoughts and experiences, begin even to think as a single unit. Both authors depict what Palmer refers to as "*intermental thought*, which is joint, group, shared, or collective thought, as opposed to intramental, or private, individual thought" (196).

Personal Days and *Then We Came to the End* use the first-person plural perspective to capture how groups act, think, and feel in ways that are similar to, yet significantly different from, individuals. In a very commonsense way, these novels reverse the traditional perspective of the novel that generally privileges a single protagonist and his or her inner life and experiences.[19] In such fictions, the reader is made to empathize or understand a single character,

[19] Much has been written about the rise of individualism in the Western world and the attendant rise of the novel. See, for example, Ian Watt's landmark study of this phenomenon in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe,*

which evidences at the same time as it bolsters cultural aggrandizing of individual will and agency. Park and Ferris challenge the literary glorification of individual experience in order to experiment with and create new models of mutual interdependence and agency. *Personal Days* is closer in content to what Hank Neary and Ferris describe as their first attempts at the workplace novel, a "small, angry book about work," in Hank's words. And likewise, *Then We Came to the End* becomes one of Park's "layoff narratives," a self-serving story constructed to make being laid off appear more positive, a stepping stone on the path toward bigger and better things. Park focuses his novel on the individualizing effects of precarious labor conditions, illustrating the structural forces acting against collectivity. Ferris also shows these individualizing effects, especially in the characters of Tom and Carl, but Ferris departs from Park in his redemption of collectivity. The only problem is that this redemption comes at the cost of critique: to save collectivity, Ferris essentially dispenses with an assessment of capitalism. Contrary to Park, Ferris sees light at the end of the tunnel and ends his own novel in a fashion similar to Norris, with everyone mostly alright after what turned out to be largely inconsequential layoffs. For Ferris, the interpersonal is more desirable than the collective. Knowing what is in another's heart is more important than battling against forces that are in his view, if uncontrollable, at least largely innocuous.

Frightening Gods: The Kings of Capital and Their Precarious Subjects in Helen DeWitt's *Lightning Rods*

In *Personal Days* and *Then We Came to the End*, the workers suffer from the contemporary phenomenon of corporate downsizing, something that has affected white-collar workplaces over

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Richardson and Fielding (1957), as well as Nancy Armstrong's *How Novels Thinks: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900* (2006).

the last 30 to 40 years in ways that it never quite did before. However, there is a sense in which the suffering these workers face, the loss of comfort promised by secure middle-class employment, pales in comparison to the suffering faced by much more disadvantaged groups both within the white-collar work sphere and outside of it—those who have never experienced the comfort of secure, long-term contractual employment. This latter group of people has been designated by Guy Standing as *the precariat*, an economic class whose common experience is a lack of financial and employment security. Though women suffer the existential angst of impending layoffs alongside their male coworkers in Ed Park's and Joshua Ferris's novels, it is unclear how their experiences are particularly gendered. In general their suffering is described in analogous terms, or, in the case of Ferris's novel, it is described in far less detail than the experiences of the more primary male characters. In reality, women have suffered far more from contingent and insecure labor than men, both historically as well as in more recent shifts in employment, something certainly underrepresented in the previous two novels.[20] Moreover, the 2017 #MeToo movement has shed light on the manner in which sexual harassment against women is a common practice not only in the upper echelons of Hollywood, where it has served as a cruel rite of passage for many actresses in starting their careers, but also within the far less exciting atmosphere of the white-collar office. In her 2011 novel, *Lightning Rods*, Helen DeWitt corrects the trend in 21st-century workplace novels to either focus on white men or depict the men and women as stand-ins for one another as regards their experiences in the office.[21] In *Lightning Rods*, a novel ostensibly depicting how one man's sexual fantasy becomes an answer

[20] This oversight is not unique to fiction, however. Even Putnam shrugs away the gendered history of employment precarity in his study of declining civic engagement, writing, "women continue to have much lower job tenure than men, primarily because they are more likely to move in and out of the labor market" (89).
[21] Writing for *The New Yorker*, Alexandra Schwartz identifies *Lightning Rods* as "the sexual-harassment satire to read in a post-Harvey Weinstein world."

to sexual harassment lawsuits in virtually every American workplace, there is a very clear divide between male and female workers and especially the job security promised to either.

In her groundbreaking study of the growth of temporary employment, Erin Hatton tracks the temp industry's rise to contemporary prominence in the United States from its humble beginnings in the 1940s. Hatton holds the temp industry responsible for a global shift in the job market toward what she refers to as the "liability model of work," a philosophy that holds a firm's workers to be costly and detrimental to the bottom line of the company (4). Hatton dates this model back to the 19th century with the advent of management theory and notes that it has always dominated modern attitudes toward labor. However, she writes that it has also always been in competition with the "asset model of work," a philosophy that values employee well-being and places it among the primary motives of the company (4). The asset model of work reached its apex under Fordist capitalism, which featured strong worker benefits and union creation and participation (5). In the 1970s, however, with the neoliberal turn, attitudes toward labor shifted to prefer the liability model, a trend that has only gotten worse in the decades since then. Hatton argues that the temp industry, in its effort to create a corporate climate open to its own unique approach to employment, "also laid the groundwork for a host of broader changes in the workplace, including corporate downsizing, outsourcing, and the comprehensive attack on organized labor" (14-5). I would argue that it is more plausible that the temp industry, and its considerable growth from the mid-century to the turn of the 21st century, has been, among the trends Hatton lists, a symptom rather than a primary cause of the more macrolevel neoliberal turn in capitalism. The systematic legal and economic effort to strip away worker protections and regulations under neoliberalism goes further in explaining these trends in employment insecurity than the organized effort by the temp industry to legitimize its form of temporary employment.

The reason the temp industry was able to so successfully integrate its vision into a now-normalized employment practice is the work that had already been done by neoliberal economists and politicians. The current trend toward more flexible work arrangements has of course benefitted the temp industry. While the flood of layoffs in certain industries has not exactly meant the permanent elimination of those positions, businesses have turned to the temp industry to fill those jobs, "using temps as part of a long-term strategy to permanently 'temp out' specific jobs or job categories" (Hatton 12). The 1990s were a particular boom period for the temp industry and the larger category of contingent labor. Hatton reports that "temp employment accounted for half of the reduction in unemployment" in that period, and Jackie Krasas Rogers claims that contingent employment "outpaced overall employment growth" (138). Hatton also writes that Manpower, the largest temporary work provider in the world, in the 90s surpassed General Motors as "the largest employer in the United States" (17-18).

Temp labor has always in some way been associated with female labor, or what Louise Kapp Howe famously termed *pink-collar work*: that is, sectors of the employment market generally dominated by women, such as the service industry, clerical work, and care work. Hatton illustrates the manner in which the temp industry "cast temp work as 'women's work' in order to justify an entirely new category of 'respectable' (white, middle-class) but marginal work" (7). Hatton points out that this branding of temporary labor as particularly suitable for women was a deliberate effort to take advantage of "the deep cultural ambivalence about white, middle-class women working" (7). Because the attitudes toward labor at the time were such that temporary work, which did not provide any benefits or health insurance in contrast to the majority of secure labor, was unappealing to white, middle-class men, the temp industry branded temp work as women's work. Lisa Adler argues that the temp industry was so successful in its

normalization of contingent labor specifically due to "its ability to call forth familiar gender narratives associated with the public and private roles of women" (216). As Hatton writes, "Arguing that temps were only housewives working for 'pin money,' temp executives successfully created a sector of the economy that was effectively beyond the reach of a range of worker protections" (7). This continued into the late 1960s and 70s, when the temp industry sold the image of the Kelly Girl as a model employee through aggressive advertisement campaigns featuring attractive, young, white, middle-class women (7). Of course, it is not only and certainly not primarily white, middle-class women who have been targeted by contingent labor practices. Hatton reports that, while that image helped grow the sector, temporary work has since moved on to other marginalized identities in the workforce: "temps are disproportionately young, female, nonwhite, immigrant, and less educated than their permanent counterparts" (13-4). In other words, the temp industry has specifically targeted those identities that are more disadvantaged in the employment process to build its force of permanently contingent workers. For people with fewer options, any work is better than no work, and thus contingent labor expands naturally as the discrimination within—and elimination of—more secure jobs becomes normal.

In *Lightning Rods*, DeWitt takes the ideal Kelly Girl temp employee to the extreme limit. In the novel, a failing salesman, Joe, invents a solution to what (in the novel) is referred to as the ongoing sexual harassment litigation crisis in the modern office building.[22] His solution, spurred by his own masturbatory fantasies, is to install within the working ranks of problem offices women willing to anonymously engage in worktime coitus with top-performing male workers.

[22] The first office manager to buy into Joe's scheme explains his capitulation thusly: "I've explained to a couple of the more egregious offenders that there are no certainties, the fact that a young woman is wearing high heels does not mean she can be guaranteed not to sue you […] I have to say I'm getting sick and tired of wondering when some girl is going to get awarded $1 million in damages because the firm didn't protect her from their shenanigans" (67).

Practically, Joe sets up trap doors in the shared wall between the disabled stalls in the men's and women's bathrooms, through which the lightning rod is inserted backwards so as to preserve her anonymity as well as her male coworkers'. The theory behind this solution is that, because top-performing men are more likely to sexually harass, releasing their energy on someone totally consenting negates the potential for nonconsensual harassment. In the comedic "object" of the lightning rod, Joe literalizes the characteristics of the Kelly Girl that in the real world remain somewhat symbolic (see figure 1). The image suggested by the Kelly Girl is essentially the mistress: she is young, she is attractive, and you only have to see her when you want to see her. She requires minimal maintenance, and you can dispose of her whenever she starts asking for too much. For DeWitt, the lightning rod is the perfect image of what is suggested by the Kelly Girl. There for a quick release, the lightning rod never talks, she essentially has no feelings, and for an employer she is a great replacement for the type of female employee who would present as a potential hazard for sexual harassment lawsuits.

DeWitt, however, not only literalizes the Kelly Girl in her novel; she also takes the phenomenon of gendered employment contingency to its logical conclusion. Though salesman Joe begins the novel painfully ill-equipped for selling encyclopedias and vacuum cleaners, he strikes gold when he comes up with a solution both to female whistle-blowers in the workplace and to the financial burden of full-time employees. Joe's success, the novel suggests, is in large part due to his endless supply of positive thinking, which characterizes much of the free-indirect discourse through which the novel is narrated. In her brilliant analysis of *Lightning Rods,* Sianne Ngai describes the comedic convention of the gimmick as a central metaphor for the novel at large. Not only does the gimmick describe the image of the lightning rods and their practical setup, a sort of Rube Goldberg contraption with a lot of comical moving parts; the gimmick also

characterizes the manner in which Joe employs positive thinking and a skewed “common sense” to think and talk his way out of various challenges throughout the novel. Joe’s commonsense logic and the narrative process of arriving at his conclusions are a kind of peek behind the curtain for the reader, an illumination by DeWitt of how people who dominate the economy think and feel. Though Ngai does not explicitly reference positive thinking in her descriptions of Joe’s insights and sense-making, I would argue that positive thinking—with its ability to both jumpstart activity and thought as well as foreclose upon too much hurtful self-reflection—is the primary engine behind both Joe’s thought process and the novel’s narrative progression.

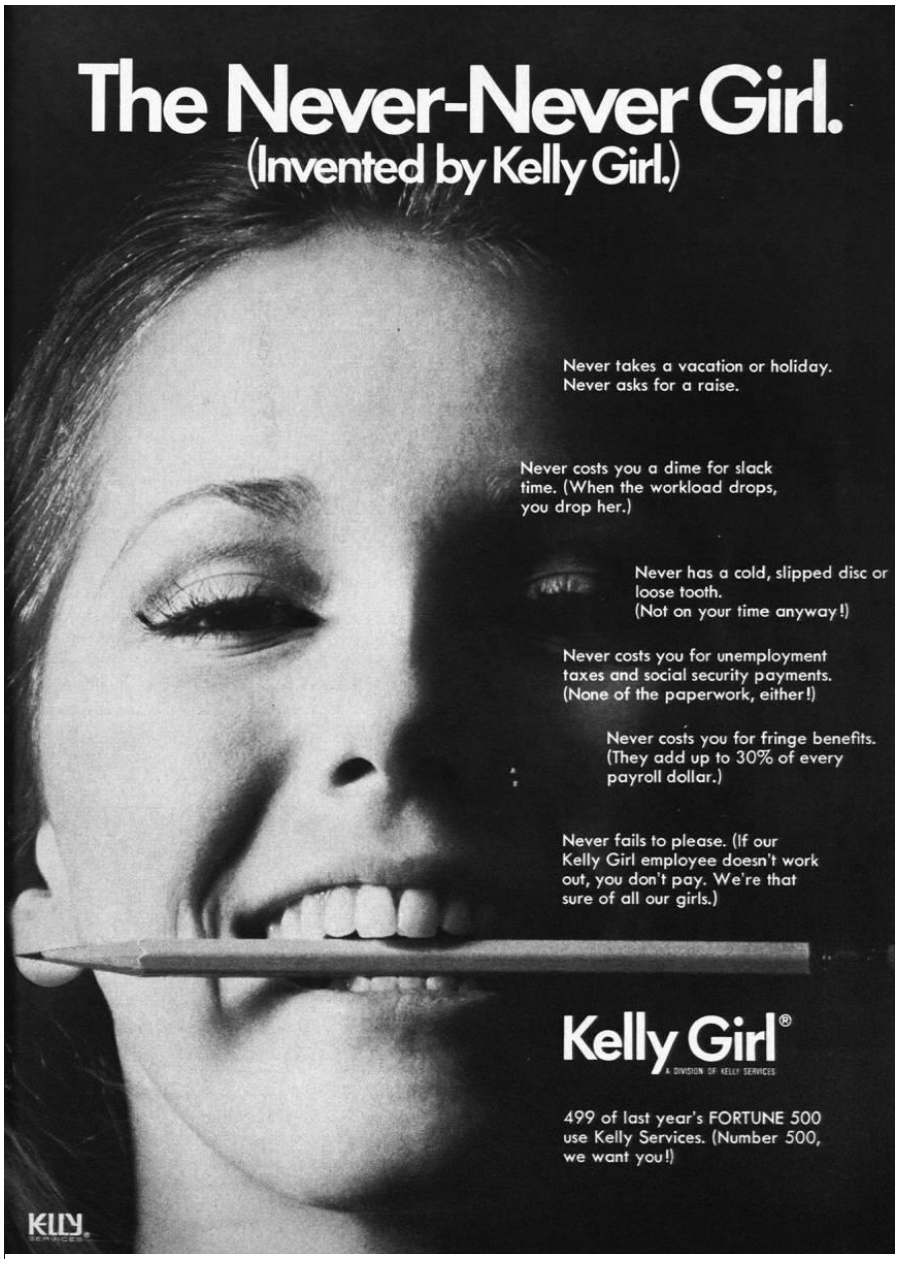

Figure 1. Advertisement for Never-Never Girl by Kelly Services from Erin Hatton; *The Temp Economy*, Temple University Press, 2011.

The first line of the novel reads, "One way of looking at it is that it was just an unfortunate by-product of Hurricane Edna" (5). Immediately the story opens with an appeal to both moral relativism and minimal responsibility on Joe's part, what amounts to the claim: "It wasn't me; it was the hurricane." This relativism, this "way of looking at it" is a through-line in the novel. Moral quandaries are often solved, and sales are always pitched, with an appeal to the

power of perspective. There is no moral truth in DeWitt's novel beyond that which springs forth from the appraisal of the individual, who is often either a buyer or a seller. As Flesch points out in his brief analysis of the novel, this retrospective lament mischaracterizes the tone of the proceeding narrative. There is never any retrospection, and surely no regret, beyond this opening sentence. DeWitt illustrates the centrality of blamelessness and relativism to the process of selling in an early passage:

> One day it occurred to him that the problem was he was selling something people could do without. How much better to sell something people knew they needed anyway! Something that didn't make people give you weird looks! Something like vacuum cleaners. Because he just knew the problem wasn't with him. The problem wasn't even with the product. The problem was with the people. (5)

This revelatory moment in the novel illustrates in procedure the manner in which subsequent passages characterize Joe's thought process, the way he consciously maps a solution to whatever trouble he finds himself in. The reader can almost picture Joe literally pulling himself up by his proverbial bootstraps in this scene, each enthusiastic exclamation point a narrative pick-me-up. The last three lines in this section especially illuminate the driving force behind Joe's ability to self-start. Rather than mull over his own failings or the failings of his product, Joe concludes that the people themselves are the problem; and as such, it is his responsibility to change their minds, an endeavor that characterizes the rest of the novel. Though it may actually be true that success requires an externalization of blame in order to get back on the proverbial horse, something Martin Seligman explores in *Learned Helplessness*, there is something nonetheless discomfiting about an individual who insulates himself from shame in order to come up with a scheme to outfit every office handicap bathroom stall with a ready-for-use prostitute. If Joe's positive

thinking seems more or less banal in this early passage, DeWitt takes that logic to its terminus by the end of the novel, when, upon securing the immortality of his company and service, the story ends with the line, "In America anything is possible" (297).

DeWitt illustrates through Joe's ceaseless common sense conclusions the trappings of narrative, the way in which common sense takes for granted its own logical explanatory power. Joe's defenses of his approach only hold up if the reader is swept away by the power of his persuasion, the power of his positive thinking. Joe's commonsense ingenuity brings to mind Wendy Brown's argument that "[n]eoliberalism governs as sophisticated common sense" (35). Even a cursory analysis of the premises upon which his proofs are founded reveals logical fallacies, pseudo-science, and folk psychology. About DeWitt's first novel, *The Last Samurai*, James Wood writes, "What grounds all DeWitt's brilliance and game-playing is the way that she dramatizes a certain kind of hyperintelligent rationalism and probes its irregular distribution of blindness and insight," and it is clear in *Lightning Rods* that the subject of rationalism remains a particular interest of DeWitt. Through the free-indirect discourse in the novel—mostly narrated through Joe—DeWitt is able to depict the logical structure to all of Joe's seemingly irrational ideas. Take this passage, for example, in which Joe rationalizes to himself—and therefore the reader—the social good his product represents:

> Because you have to deal with people the way they are, not the way you'd like them to be, and unfortunately most men tend not to respect women who have the same urges they have. Or even if a woman doesn't have the same urges, but just provides an outlet, men tend not to respect her. Because if you take people the way they are, most men tend to see sticking their dick into someone as a form of domination. To be honest, if you take people the way they are, that's what they like about it. It's not just the physical sensation.

> That's exactly why masturbation is so unsatisfactory. The physical sensation is pretty much the same. But the domination is all in your head. (26-7)

As with many of Joe's ideas, the logic of this passage is built upon the first assumption that most men do not respect women who have sexual urges. Because of this, Joe feels he needs to provide—for both men and women—women who do not mind being disrespected. Building from this first conclusion, Joe provides a secondary assumption that most men view sex as domination. This second assumption allows him to legitimize making the lightning rods stationary, powerless sex objects. Joan Acocella writes about *Lightning Rods*, "Even more than attitudes toward women, however, the object of DeWitt's satire is the oily, sophistic reasoning used to defend such views." While I agree that Joe's rationalizations and his productive process—specifically his positive thinking—form the novel's aesthetic structure, it is clear in the subject matter and the narrative arc that "attitudes toward women" are key to understanding *Lightning Rods*. If Joe's thought process and his immense success seem unprecedented and hence comedic, it is only because we expect that someone will surely object to the product he is introducing to the market. In a very persuasive illustration, the novel shows the reader how neoliberalism asserts market logics into all domains of life, even and specifically ethical domains. As Brown puts it, "neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities […] and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors" (31).

DeWitt's novel is a clever critique of the way in which neoliberalism has acted economically to solve problems that present themselves explicitly along ethical lines. It is significant that Joe's solution to sexual harassment is in fact a solution to sexual harassment litigation, a problem not for specific groups of individuals but rather for corporations and thus the economy at large. The role of positive thinking in neoliberalism is therefore presented

specifically economically. What is good for corporations is good for the economy, and what is good for the economy is good for the people. All is for the best in the best of all possible economic configurations. David Flusfeder writes in the introduction to the novel that *Lightning Rods* is written in the mode of a "comedy of procedure," illustrating "how goods and people are engineered into becoming parts of a functioning world" (ix). What Flusfeder gets wrong in this analysis, however, is that the novel is not simply about how *people* are governmentalized but rather how *women* are governmentalized at the hands of men with unreasonable reserves of power and influence. The comedy of procedure, as Ngai describes it, "turns modern rationality in general into an aesthetic experience," lifting the veil over the creation of things and ideas so that the audience can see their procedural logics (467). In *Lightning Rods*, the procedure on display is not only the coming-into-being of an employer cost-cutting scheme originating from one man's strange sexual fantasy but also the monopolization of that scheme over nearly all female office employment in the United States.

Despite its bizarre premise, DeWitt's novel is more concerned with the growth of temporary work than it is with sexual harassment. Temporary work, while related to a culture of corporate downsizing and personnel-elimination, is also distinct from it. Even if the characters in Park's and Ferris's novels experienced extreme anxiety in the face of impending layoffs, this was merely a novel encounter with what the temporary workforce faces on a regular basis. If instability is a plague on formerly comfortable employment contracts and arrangements, it is essentially the stabilizing factor of temporary work: it is flexibility that rigidly characterizes the temp industry. While the positive thinking involved in corporate downsizing in Park's novel is seen as a way to lubricate the hard pill of job loss, something that is sold to the workers by their employers, the positivity in DeWitt's critique of temporary work is something sold to the public

at large. It is thus a public relations strategy, a way of subduing the masses by convincing them that the permanent instability of certain sectors of work is something to be embraced: after all, it solved the sexual harassment (claims) crisis. *Lightning Rods* could be said to have sprung directly from the following sentence from Bourdieu's talk on precarity: "Casualization of employment is part of a *mode of domination* of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation" (85, italics in the original). What is curious about temporary work in DeWitt's novel, however, is that the reader is never really forced to engage with it in the way that he or she must engage with the anxiety experienced by the downsized workers in *Personal Days* and *Then We Came to the End*. Superficially, *Lightning Rods* is a triumphalist account of one go-getter's get-rich-quick scheme.

The novel is also, however, as much about female employment as it is about temporary work. In fact, by the end of the novel, the two mean very nearly the same thing. After Joe has successfully monopolized the market that he created himself, he is able to branch out into the field of general temporary employment. Because his product has become so successful, there are now Christian-oriented companies nervous about the possibility that lightning rods have snuck into their workforce. To combat this anxiety, Joe partners with these companies to ensure that none of their temporary female employees will be lightning rods (made possible by Joe having a monopoly over that service). This means that Joe's business basically becomes a temp agency for businesses that do not want lightning rods, which makes his business not only a monopoly for lightning rod provision but also for lightning rod prevention. This monopoly over the temporary employment industry makes all female temp workers possible sex workers as well. As Ngai elegantly puts it, "At the beginning of the novel, female sex work implies or requires temping; by

the end, female temping implies or requires sex work" (504). In a spin on Schrodinger's cat, women in white-collar workplaces both are and are not lightning rods.

In the character of Joe, DeWitt cunningly analyzes together the cynicism embedded within capitalist and positive thinking approaches to social ills. Even the term Joe arrives at for his office prostitutes, *lightning rods*, is very obviously ideological. If actual lightning rods are built for the purpose of constructively redirecting lightning strikes, Joe's cooptation of those devices reveals his belief that the sexual energy that is directed from the men toward their female coworkers in the form of sexual harassment is a natural process, a fact of nature that his lightning rods are put to the purpose of redirecting in a healthy and consensual manner. This naturalization of sexual harassment comes out also in his thought process behind dreaming up the lightning rods:

> A physical urge is a physical urge. What's shameful is to look the other way and let the devil take the hindmost, instead of dealing with it responsibly. Because the fact was, these unsatisfied urges were causing an incredible amount of wastefulness and suffering. Women were being molested in the workplace solely because their colleagues did not have a legitimate outlet for urges they could not control. Men who had worked hard and who had a valuable contribution to make were being put at risk, through no fault of their own. And it was shame, false shame, that had kept people from dealing effectively with the situation. (27-8).

As will become even clearer as the novel progresses, the characters who succeed in the world DeWitt has constructed waste no time genuinely worrying about the plight of women. The site of critique and empathy here is the suffering of top salesmen who supposedly sublimate their carnal sexual desires by harassing female coworkers. As Joe argues in the final sentence of the above

passage, the cause for the sexual harassment epidemic is shame, and its solution requires shamelessness, and nobody embodies that brand of shamelessness more than Joe himself.

While Flesch uses the similarity of all the characters' voices to illustrate the novel's "depiction of the absolute triumph of social networking as the only medium of human interaction," it is more directly in line with the novel's major critique of capitalist sense-making to see the characters' typology as representative of the sorts of personalities the neoliberal model of capitalism naturally and purposefully fosters. If the voiced characters in *Lightning Rods* all sound the same, it is because the novel imagines an economic system in which the winners think and talk in exactly the same manner. A third of the way into the novel, the reader meets one of Joe's "one woman in a thousand" who actually sees the positive side of the work lightning rods need to do (47). Her name is Lucille, and she narrates her thought processes in exactly the same cadences and wording as Joe himself:

> Besides, the thing to remember is there are two ways of looking at things you don't like that life throws at you. One way is to emphasize the negative and just fall apart because every little thing isn't exactly the way you like it. The other way is to look at it as an opportunity to practice dealing with things you don't like. It's a chance to practice not letting things get to you. (103)

Lucille goes on to be a very successful lawyer; she is one of the two female success stories the reader encounters in the novel, the other being a woman who becomes a Supreme Court judge. Rather than exemplifying poor writing on DeWitt's part, the similarities in verbiage between all the main voiced characters illustrates one of the more important points to be gleaned from the novel—that is, the way in which an economic structure has come to circumscribe the kinds of people who are allowed to succeed within it, as well as how that success is described and

communicated. This is illustrated as well in Joe's first musings upon his lightning rod invention. For Joe, successful salespeople—in the novel's case, exclusively men—are the kind of people who have a particular sort of drive, one that is exacerbated by their successes and displays itself in the form of sexual harassment. If uncontrollable sexual urges characterize successful men, DeWitt illustrates in the above passage the manner in which accommodation to the fact of sexual subjugation characterizes successful women. To be successful, the novel tells us, requires women to settle for the status quo of gendered inequality and aggression, or "aggro" in Joe's diction (27). The novel suggests that the only solution to male aggression against some women is the commitment by other women to willingly absorb that aggression. In that way, the novel could be read analogously as a rather astute critique of nostalgic leftist solutions to growing employment precarity, solutions that in some way call for a return to the employment stability of Fordist capitalism.[23] What is often left out of such solutions is the recognition that Fordist stability was accompanied by, and even secured through, the normative family construct that positioned the wife in the home with none of her own employment opportunities, let alone stability.

The language of *Lightning Rods*, when narrated through Joe especially, often mimics the style of self-help literature. Early in the novel, DeWitt writes in free-indirect discourse through Joe's consciousness, "when you start a new job it's important to give it everything you've got" (6). This thought continues with the parroting of a central tenet of self-help literature's absurd bromides: "It's important to give that new job 101%, 25 hours a day, 366 days a year" (6). Passages such as these give the novel the qualities of a self-help manual, a glimpse into the mindset of the kinds of people who succeed in this world, archetypical individuals representing

[23] For a comprehensive analysis of such leftist nostalgia, see the first chapter of Melinda Cooper's *Family Values* (7-24).

themselves as case studies for the benefits of their particular attitudes. If the reader is supposed to be skeptical of the advice offered through the different characters, given that many of the attitudes and ideas are represented purposefully as illogical and even absurd, the novel challenges this skepticism by presenting Joe's dubious solution to a civil rights crisis as a provably positive social good.

What is especially challenging in the novel is that DeWitt makes a great case for the sacrificial politics of lightning rods in the workplace, enough so that even some reviewers were swept up by its satirical solutions to sexual harassment.[24] Though the work may be tough for the majority of the women who volunteer for it, the reader is told in no uncertain terms that the enterprise as a whole has succeeded in reducing sexual harassment claims in American offices. Halfway through the novel, Joe's test case for the lightning rod innovation reports record lows in employee absenteeism. In the words of the hopelessly inept human resources worker, Roy, "male employees were finding it a lot more appealing to come in to work than they had six months ago. But as a matter of fact so were the female employees. Because even nine in a month was significantly down on the number of female employees who had been off sick six months ago" (129). From this passage, the reader understands that the lightning rods have actually had a positive impact on employee morale. This passage also, however, falls in line with the majority of the narrative, which tends to privilege people benefiting from lightning rods rather than those hurt by them. Because the novel is mostly narrated through Joe and two exceptionally successful and determined women, the reader only really sees the positive aspects of Joe's invention; we see

[24] Flesch, for example, writes, "Though the lightning rods are a literalized commodification of women, these women, just as much as their uni-functional peers in the office have ways of looking at things too. Some even prove themselves to be good salesmen." As I will show, this conclusion overlooks the women not only harassed by overzealous men but whose desperation for employment is exploited by Joe's monopoly over female white-collar job-placement.

only the exceptions to the rule, a rule that is portrayed mostly in the background of the novel. Certainly capitalism has had no trouble keeping up with the latest advances in civil rights, but to say that the novel is sincerely suggesting a capitalist solution to sexual harassment in the office seems to me a severe misreading. In answer to Lee Konstantinou's questions in his review of *Lightning Rods*—"What, DeWitt seems to be asking, is the matter with Joe's scheme, if anything? Who would really suffer if it were implemented?"—I would point to the few sections in the novel in which the lightning rods less enthusiastic and fortunate than Lucille and Renee are given a voice, even if consistently delivered through Joe's loathsome mocking.

The rule is that, overall, women suffer in DeWitt's novel. It is revealed late in the novel that the majority of Joe's employees—instead of being can-do go-getters like himself, fully understanding the requirements of the job and mentally and emotionally prepared for them—are actually "people who didn't have a lot of choices" (165). Because most of his employees were driven to employment through need rather than desire, Joe spends a lot of his time fielding calls from workers who believe they have in some way been harassed by the male clientele. From the occasional "slap on the fanny" to the more extreme case of a male client urinating on one of the lightning rods, it is clear to the reader that there are voices not exactly being heard in the novel, a narrative strand purposefully being shrouded (160-2). Even those dissenting voices the reader does hear are channeled mockingly through Joe's free-indirect narration. Through the contradictory facts presented in the novel—the supposed increase in morale alongside the suggestion that many of the women are being taken advantage of—DeWitt demands that the reader arrives at an insight contradictory to the narrative's overarching ethic, a uniquely capitalist ethic that equates moral goodness with economic success. The brilliance of this approach is that it forces the reader into the position of a benefactor of Joe's invention, a position that might also

be occupied by the general public. With real suffering below the surface of the narrative, the reader is necessarily swept away by the sheer success of Joe's endeavor.

In the manner of the traditional entrepreneurial narrative, stretching back to the Gilded Age young adult novels by Horatio Alger, DeWitt showcases in *Lightning Rods* the power of positive thinking to effect great change not only in individuals but in society as a whole. Whereas Alger imagined a libertarian utopia able to foster the rise of such individuals, however, DeWitt sees the manner in which such a utopia—a world set up specifically to favor those with a can-do spirit—would necessarily function to the detriment of the can-do winner's structural Other, the losers upon whom winners increase their financial profiles. In her allusions to traditional entrepreneurial narratives, DeWitt signals to the reader that she sees parallels between the massive income inequalities of the late 19th century and those of the modern day. If changes to such a system require analogous uprisings by the dispossessed—whose white collars now appear very similar to those against which unions fought in the early 20th century—DeWitt suggests the necessity for structural changes in the culture itself, changes that do not merely include a return to forms of employment security founded upon the kind of gender inequality that still manages to characterize the modern economy. Neoliberal positive thinking cannot be overturned by positive thinking of a nostalgic nature. Rather, it is the voices routinely unheard, the negatively marked bodies of the neoliberal economy, that must take its place.

Chapter 2

Transparent, Dying, and Black Bodies: Neoliberal Positive Thinking and the Problematic Body in Eggers, Powers, and Rankine

It is impossible to discuss the history of positive thinking without talking about the very human inability to cope with embodiment and death. Positive thinking as an ontological theory began and grew as a response to illness and decay. Phineas Quimby conceived of New Thought under the premise that an alignment of one's mind with one's healing was the actual explanation for any successes under treatment by animal magnetists and hypnotists. While Quimby might have enjoyed more posthumous celebrity had he termed this discovery *the placebo effect*, the intellectual tradition that he founded is no small claim to fame. Mary Baker Eddy bolstered support for Quimby's ideas—even if she refused to credit his tutelage—through their institutionalization within her religious movement, Christian Science. For Eddy, the material confines of the body were only an illusion, one which could be denounced through conscious alignment with the divine truth that illness and decay are merely constructs of the mind. So sure was she of the ability of mind to overcome matter that she denied the administration of medicine and vaccines even to children, culminating in charges that she was responsible for several unnecessary deaths. In this way, early positive thinking in America was a means of coming to terms with the fact of the breakdown of the human body; or rather, positive thinking was constructed as a means of avoiding that fact altogether. Positive thinking began, in a very simple sense, as a retaliation against the fact of inevitable and absolute negation, a retaliation against the fact of embodiment cunningly achieved through a symbolic mind-body dualism whereby the material could be overcome through the mind.

The texts in this chapter reclaim the material from positive thinking's orientation toward mind; they are illuminations of positive thinking's ultimate problem, that which represents always the end to positive thinking's immortal telos: the body. Though Christian Science and its early theorizations of positive thinking have mostly vanished from the mainstream, there still exists a substantial amount of positive thinking literature that posits the ability to overcome the confines of the body through purposeful positive visualizations. Barbara Ehrenreich's critique of positive thinking emerged from her experience with breast cancer, specifically the types of resources suggested to her by friends and by personal blogs from breast cancer survivors or sufferers who urged her to put on a smiling face and align herself with good health. In these blogs, it is common to refer to a cancer diagnosis as a stepping stone to a more richly experienced life, "a rite of passage," as Ehrenreich writes (29). The foundation for these suggestions was not simply that being positive made the experience a bit more bearable but rather that one could overcome bodily illness through a more positive mental orientation. Beyond the usual dispensers of unhelpful advice, Ehrenreich was instructed by oncology nurses that positive thinking would indeed aid in her recovery, buoyed of course by decades-old—yet still generally celebrated—scientific studies attesting to the ability of a positive attitude to bolster the immune system (33-6). Despite the numerous studies in more recent years that specifically focus on cancer sufferers within support groups and psychotherapy, and have attested to the lack of any correlation between attitude and survival rates, the notion that a positive outlook can expedite recovery and increase chances of survival has continued to gain traction (37-9).[1] In both positive thinking and positive psychology, the body is always implicated in the project of positivity. If negativity symbolizes and begets death, then positivity necessarily symbolizes and begets life. In

[1] James C. Coyne et al. conclude in their 2007 study that "emotional functioning is not an independent predictor of survival in cancer patients" (2568).

Learned Optimism (1990), Martin Seligman argues about optimists, "Their health is unusually good, they age well, much freer than most of us from the usual physical ills of middle age. Evidence suggests they may even live longer" (5).

For whatever relationship positive thinking currently has to the body, neoliberalism matches it nearly tit for tat. Countless scholars have written on the new neoliberal relationship to the body, often anchored by Foucault's large theoretical contribution on the subject, especially his lectures on biopolitics. For Foucault, central to understanding neoliberalism's view of the individual's relationship to his body is the work by mid-to-late-20th-century economists such as Gary Becker on "human capital." Under neoliberal governance, the state relinquishes responsibility for the health of its citizens. The role of the government—or rather, as Foucault corrects himself, "the economy"—under neoliberalism is "to see to it that every individual has sufficient income to be able […] to insure himself against existing risks, or the risks of life, the inevitability of old age and death, on the basis of his own private reserves" (144).[2] If the individual is then meant to conceive of himself as "a sort of enterprise for himself," among his collection of enterprises is to insure against risks thrust upon him at birth, as Foucault argues in a tangential argument on the burgeoning field of genetics (225). Foucault argues that neoliberal thinkers in the field of human capital conceive of the individual as a kind of machine, "but a machine understood in the positive sense, since it is a machine that produces an earnings stream" (224). He adds, however, "In reality this machine has a lifespan, a length of time in which it can be used, an obsolescence, and an ageing" (224-5). In my analysis, this contradiction between the *idea* of the subject under neoliberalism and the *reality* of human existence is crucial to

[2] This is one area perhaps that Foucault was not quite prescient, specifically in the case of the United States, where the record levels of medical debt continue to surge, clearly indicating a disconnect between income and healthcare costs. David U. Himmelstein et al. conclude in their 2007 report, "Illness and medical bills contribute to a large and increasing share of US bankruptcies" (741).

understanding the effect of neoliberal governmentality on what has been called, within the field of sociology, *death anxiety*. As Ernest Becker argues in his groundbreaking study, *The Denial of Death* (1973), death anxiety is endemic in all periods of human existence and is inherent to the human condition. While other scholars—specifically those within the field of sociology, including such eminent scholars as Bauman and Giddens—study the emergence of death anxiety in the broader context of *modernity*, I find it both more specific and more accurate to look at the emergent discourse of risk and vulnerability in the context of the neoliberal turn in socio-politics. It would be misleading to argue that death anxiety arises only within the last 40-50 years and only within those societies that have instituted neoliberal policies. Nevertheless, though it is not my argument that neoliberalism and positive thinking have *created* death anxiety, I will illustrate how both have acted to frame the problem of death in terms befitting their distinct—yet interlinked—programs in ways that utilize what is innate about being human while also simultaneously promising to transcend it.

Both positive thinking and neoliberalism set up *wellness projects*, methods of self-conditioning that keep the individual in top physical and psychological shape and explicitly combat the degradation of the body. In *The Happiness Industry* (2015), William Davies writes about the contemporary conjunction of positive thinking, the larger "happiness industry," and neoliberalism. As I illustrated in the previous chapter, happiness has entered the realm of economics because it is no longer enough for subjects to simply opt into the workplace; rather, through neoliberalism's logics, subjects must internalize the workplace, making all activity applicable to one's human capital. Davies argues that "the future of successful capitalism depends on our ability to combat stress, misery and illness, and put relaxation, happiness and wellness in their place" (4). New technologies for self-monitoring have entered the market,

making it easier than ever—and therefore more necessary—for individuals to optimize everything from their moods to their diets. Carl Cederström and André Spicer write in *The Wellness Syndrome* (2015) that neoliberalism treats "wellness as a moral imperative" (4). For neoliberalism and positive thinking, the wellness project is infinitely ongoing, one that is curiously both achievable and never-ending.

My argument in this chapter is that contemporary American literature is staging the problem of positive thinking and neoliberal self-optimization as a distinctly existential problem, pulling back the layers of rhetoric to reveal what William James refers to in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as "the worm at the core" (137).[3] "Smile or die," the title of Ehrenreich's study of positive thinking, positive psychology, and contemporary capitalism, is the desublimated instruction by neoliberal positive thinking to individuals. For the writers in this chapter specifically, capitalism and positive thinking take advantage of innate human concerns and capitalize on those concerns. That is, positive thinking not only instructs individuals to always turn away from the inevitability of their mortality but also makes the weight of that attendant death anxiety ever heavier, stripping individuals of the means of dealing with death as a problem. In the sections that follow, I will illustrate how Dave Eggers, Richard Powers, and Claudia Rankine throw into stark relief the immortal telos proposed by positive thinking.

Ernest Becker refers to the human as a "self-conscious animal" aware of its own inevitable death (87). Building from Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Rank's *Will Therapy* (1931) and American classical scholar Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959), Becker argues

[3] This phrase appears in the section of James's book on "healthy-mindedness." His only reproach of the growing New Thought movement is that it did not deal meaningfully enough with the fact of death and the human awareness of its inevitability. He writes, "In short, life and its negation are beaten up inextricably together. But if the life be good, the negation of it must be bad. Yet the two are equally essential facts of existence; and all natural happiness thus seems infected with a contradiction. The breath of the sepulcher surrounds it" (137).

that the prospect of death is at the core of human self-consciousness in a way that it is not for any other animal.[4] For him, death anxiety is "the anxiety that results from the human paradox that man is an animal who is conscious of his animal limitation" (87). As such, this awareness creates a uniquely human anxiety, one that requires enormous resources to quell so that we can go about our day-to-day lives with some morsel of normalcy. This problem leads Becker to argue that "the idea of death, the fear of it […] is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man" (ix). One need not be convinced by Becker's conclusion that *all* human activity is organized around denying the inevitability of death to accept the basic premise that death's inevitability and the uniquely human awareness of it generates a special kind of anxiety. Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that modern power is organized around the sanctity of life and the bolstering thereof. For Foucault, "it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body" (143): or, in Grace Kyungwon Hong's analysis, "*affirmation* […] more so than repression […] is where power inheres" (167). I argue, however, that the authors in this chapter illustrate how narratives of affirmation are always underpinned by the anxiety of repression. We are positive so as not to be negative; we speak of life so as not to think of death. The modern forms of biopolitical power do not operate on either affirmation or repression but on the simultaneity of the two: repression *through* affirmation and vice versa. Modern positivity discourses and neoliberalism take up the existential issue of death anxiety and explicitly politicize it. Death anxiety becomes a battleground on which neoliberalism and positive thinking stake their claim, offering new and unique methods of overcoming or specifically avoiding this anxiety.

[4] Though Becker does not acknowledge his influence, it is clear that the phenomenon he describes in his analysis shares characteristics with Heidegger's description of "being-toward-death" in *Being and Time* (1927).

The writers in this chapter put positive thinking in conversation with its neglected existential underbelly, the element of being human that is often overlooked within positive thinking's narrative. In *The Circle* (2013), Eggers examines attitudes toward the body and the body's presentation within a monopolizing service and technological industry. Working within the tradition of the dystopian novel, *The Circle* critiques the binary nature of utopian thinking within the historical particularity of 21st-century tech companies and the neoliberal business model they have embraced. Inherent to this model is an attitude toward the body preoccupied not only with the way it is presented to others—through physical markers of positivity such as smiling—but also with the body's constant surveillance and upkeep. This surveillance is premised in the novel on the necessity for the individual to be aware of his or her propensity for illness and proximity to death. If neoliberal discourse is favorable toward self-tracking technologies, Eggers sheds doubt on the existential consequences of these technologies.

Powers takes some of the existential issues raised in *The Circle* even further in his sixth novel, *Gain* (1998), in which he critiques capitalism's mobilization of desire. In the novel, the desire that sits at the heart of capitalism is fundamentally intolerant of the inevitability of death. In its dual-thread narrative, *Gain* dramatizes on one hand the life-story of a 19th-century New England soap-manufacturer turned end-of-20th-century conglomerate, and on the other hand the death-story of a midwestern woman, Laura Bodey, who has been diagnosed with cancer. It becomes clear in the novel that the story of the Clare Corporation is also the story of capitalism in the United States, and in Powers's story of American capitalism—much like DeWitt's description of Joe's thought-logic—positive thinking is at the heart of the capitalist enterprise. At the heart of this positive thinking, however, is a severe intolerance for thoughts of death. Powers situates this intolerance in conversation with the contemporary responsibilization of the self by

neoliberal rhetoric and illustrates the manner in which positive thinking has been put to use in this new responsible age, not only to reinforce the individual's ultimate responsibility for his or her health but also to further entrench an existential denial of death.

Rankine writes in her essay-poem, *Citizen* (2014), of the specificity of black precarity in contemporary America. If the avoidance of death and its inevitability is treated metaphorically in *The Circle* and medically in *Gain*, Rankine illustrates the manner in which thoughts of death permeate the black psyche in a rather explicit and literal fashion. In her collection, Rankine situates anecdotal accounts of microaggressions alongside more visible instances of violent racism to place the black body within a historical continuum of violence and bigotry. This continuum is starkly at odds with the triumphalist account of history provided by America's positive thinking telos. And yet, black Americans are, like most Americans, encouraged to look to the future with hope. Bringing together otherwise disconnected events such as the death of Trayvon Martin, the treatment of tennis player Serena Williams, and the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, Rankine challenges not only centrist appeals to contemporary progress but also the discursive tradition within African American thought that emphasizes hope rather than pessimism.

Hidden Potential: Cleanliness, Utopianism, and the Quantified Self in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*

Dave Eggers's *The Circle* dichotomizes cleanliness and filth, positivity and negativity, techno-utopianism and technophobia, fitness and infirmity. In the Circle's sterilized worldview, individuals and spaces are described merely in terms of *with us* or *against us*. In the tradition of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Eggers exposes in *The Circle*

contemporary America's willingness to submit to a technological rationality that militates against any resistance to it. In the novel, technological rationality is held up as rationality as such, and any resistance to it is characterized as irrational. In a retrospective look at the novel around the time that its film adaptation was released, Kate Knibbs, writing for *The Ringer*, argues that "the book is a reminder that technology accelerates us toward the future, often not in the exact direction we expected" ("*The Circl*e Is a Crude Warning"). This is allowed to happen, Eggers's novel tells us, because of the positive thinking at the heart of technological utopianism.

Protagonist Mae Holland is not so easily identifiable as a positive thinker as the protagonists who people Saunders's stories, those who struggle to remind themselves to look on the bright side or keep their chins up. Instead, Eggers presents to his reader a utopian in a classic sense, a positive thinker whose positivity is so unblemished that she need never *remind* herself to think positively because she so rarely encounters negative thoughts. Rather than see her radically transform throughout the novel, Eggers introduces Mae as a regular utopian in the making. Ruminating on her old desk job at a public utility, the narrator relates in free indirect discourse, "All of it felt like something from another time, a rightfully forgotten time, and made Mae feel that she was not only wasting her life but that this entire company was wasting life, wasting human potential and holding back the turning of the globe" (11). Because Mae is utopian by nature, her role at the Circle as well as in *The Circle* is that of yes-woman, someone who refuses to see the dark side of the innovations being developed and force-fed to the novel's American populace. If nothing else, *The Circle* is a testament to the way in which positive thinking erects illusions that militate against their own realization. There is a reason so many dreams of utopia in fiction are realized as dystopias. The illusion generated by promise prevents those within its bubble from recognizing their own transgressions. Everything is perfect at the Circle because

nobody sees it for the imperfect mess it is. Though *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is often cited as the most relevant literary precursor to Eggers's novel—with its descriptions of a Big Brother who is always watching and monitoring that dystopia's citizens—*Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley seems an equally relevant antecedent.[5] In relation to *The Circle*, what most importantly separates Orwell's novel from Huxley's is the disposition of the people who inhabit the different worlds. If *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s inhabitants are ruled by fear and paranoia, *Brave New World* showcases a dystopia in which nearly all the citizens are perfectly happy and/or content, and it is this difference that most clearly relates to Eggers's descriptions of Mae and the other Circlers on their tyrannical stampede into the future.

The Circle is a novel singularly obsessed with the body. Whenever a character is introduced in the novel, he or she is always provided a brief physical description. As Timothy W. Galow writes in his overview of Eggers's oeuvre, in *The Circle* "[m]ost characters get little more description than a mention of hair color or a notable feature" (116). In the very beginning of the novel, for example, Mae is introduced to Renata first by her appearance: "Mae turned to find a beautiful young head floating atop a scarlet scarf and white silk blouse" (3). Similarly, the reader is told that Annie, Mae's college roommate and the person who got her a job at the Circle, is "very cute, dimpled and long-lashed, with hair so blond it could only be real" (13). Likewise, the reader first gets an impression both of Mae's physical appearance and—more importantly—the associated attitude when Mae first walks into the Circle's main building to see an old photograph projected onto a screen.

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[5] John Masterson writes that "*The Circle* is an obvious companion to *1984*" (729). "Just like in George Orwell's *1984*," Betiel Wasihun writes in her article on *The Circle*, "ideas are promoted through slogans onto which the dullness of their creator is projected." Betsy Morais offers an extended comparison between Orwell's and Eggers's individual novels in her review of *The Circle* for *The New Yorker*.

> The picture was indeed Mae—her wide mouth, her thin lips, her olive skin, her black hair, but in this photo, more so than in life, her high cheekbones gave her a look of severity, her brown eyes not smiling, only small and cold, ready for war. Since the photo—she was eighteen then, angry and unsure—Mae had gained much-needed weight, her face had softened and curves appeared, curves that brought the attention of men of myriad ages and motives. She'd tried, since high school, to be more open, more accepting, and seeing it here, this document of a long-ago era when she assumed the worst of the world, rattled her. (5-6)

In this passage, Mae associates how she looked when she was eighteen—"her wide mouth, her thin lips, her olive skin, her black hair"—very strongly with her disposition at the time—"when she assumed the worst of the world"—and she does so critically. In the present tense of the novel, however, all her features have "softened" and so too has her attitude toward the world. This passage lays the groundwork for the novel's larger concerns with how the body is given the task of relaying disposition in a new world in which disposition is everything. This means that one must not only stay in shape but also present oneself as a positive person. This latter point is established when one compares Mae's photograph, in which "her brown eyes [are] not smiling," to the previous passage in which Mae first meets Renata, who walks up behind Mae: "She shaped her mouth into a smile, feeling a presence behind her" (3). Similarly, when Mae is confronted with a prank played by Annie, in the form of a replica desk from her time working a job in her hometown, Mae worries that her physical reaction betrays too much of her inner turmoil: "Mae knew Renata was watching her, and she knew her face was betraying something like horror. *Smile,* she thought. *Smile*" (7).

If Mae's unsmiling eyes communicated to the world her inner cynicism, the reader is made to understand Mae's myriad performative smiles as communicating the exact opposite. Throughout the novel, there is probably not a single verb that occurs more often than *smile*, and it seems everyone who works at the Circle has been trained to exhibit what David Foster Wallace, in his essay on cruise ships, referred to as the "Professional Smile" (289).[6] Eamon Bailey, "the public face of the company," is described as "the personality everyone associated with the Circle. When he smiled, which was near-constantly, his mouth smiled, his eyes smiled, his shoulders even seemed to smile" (24). And whereas the face of the company is the physical embodiment of a smile, and everyone who works at the company seems necessarily fit and in shape as a consequence of wearing fitness-tracking watches, Mercer, Mae's ex-boyfriend and one of the only dissenting voices in the novel, is described as having an "expanding stomach" (133). After giving Mae a speech about the social ills that the Circle has created, Mae recognizes all of Mercer's physical flaws: "Mae looked at his fat face. He was thickening everywhere. He seemed to be developing jowls. Could a man of twenty-five already have jowls? No wonder snack food was on his mind" (134).

As part of the novel's central concern with transparency in all areas of human activity, *The Circle* holds up to scrutiny the idea that ultimate transparency allows for perfect knowledge and thus perfect planning, while also challenging the neoliberal dynamic whereby supposed perfect knowability inherently places the individual in the position of intense responsibility. Mae

[6] Eggers clearly aligns his own critique of professional smiles with Wallace's—specifically the way in which, as Wallace puts it, "the smile […] signifies nothing more than a calculated attempt to advance the smiler's own interests by pretending to like the smilee" (289). Eggers is also, however, more sympathetic to those made to feel like they must present themselves with smiling faces. In the above passage, for example, Mae feels compelled to don a smile in a manner that reads as quite troubling: for Mae, smiling begins as an exhortation rather than a purposeful put-on. In this manner, Erich Fromm's analysis of a similar impulse to smile is particularly relevant. In his *The Fear of Freedom* (1942), Fromm writes, "early in his education, the child is taught to have feelings that are not at all 'his'; particularly is he taught to like people, to be uncritically friendly to them, and to smile" (210).

reflects early on that the Circle "was a place where everyone endeavored, constantly and passionately, to improve themselves" (105). It is made clear in the novel, however, that not everyone who works at the Circle is necessarily *choosing* to "improve themselves." Rather, it is as if that decision—along with many others—is made for them. A few weeks into her job at the Circle, Mae is notified that she is overdue to visit the company's in-house health clinic. When she arrives, she is greeted by a doctor who, like everybody else at the Circle, is impossibly youthful and cheery. Dr. Villalobos—a name that translates to "house wolves" or probably "house of wolves"—informs Mae of the clinic's aims as a "prevention-emphasis clinic," meant to stave off the onset of any health conditions rather than manage those already existing (151). This prevention strategy includes bi-weekly checkups, the reasoning being, "If you come here only when there's a problem, you never get ahead of things" (151). Dr. Villalobos informs Mae that these checkups "involve diet consultations, and we monitor any variances in your overall health. This is key for early detection, for calibrating any meds you might be on, for seeing any problems a few miles away, as opposed to after they've run you over" (151-2). When Mae questions how the company is able to afford all the preventative measures provided, Dr. Villalobos answers that "prevention is cheap" (153).

In this passage, Mae's body is presented to her as a distinct problem. Like a car, it requires regular upkeep and maintenance to keep it not only under control but *healthy*. Though the idea of catching abnormalities before they become a problem comes across in this passage as common sense, it transforms the manner in which Mae relates to her body. The emphasis here on prevention is thrown into near-comic relief later in the novel, when Mae is given some bad news about her eating habits. A viewer from Scotland has processed all of Mae's biological markers in relation to her apparent over-consumption of processed meats, and Dr. Villalobos informs Mae

that these meats increased her "propensity for cancer" (357). When Mae reacts as if she is being told she has cancer, the doctor responds, "No, no! Don't worry. It's easily solved. You don't have cancer and probably won't get it. But you know you have a marker for gastrointestinal cancer, just an increased risk" (357). It is striking, though not entirely surprising, that Mae responds to this information as if it is a diagnosis. Even the language that the doctor uses in the last passage indicates a strange relationship to risk and how it organizes behavior in the present. Mae does not "have cancer and probably won't get it," yet she must still orient her behavior around the fact that she is at "an increased risk," however negligible.

Animating Eggers's critique of bodily politics in the novel is what Ulrich Beck referred to as "the risk society" in his 1986 study by that name. For Beck, risk describes the situation in which "a possible catastrophe, which could occur in the future, is to be prevented by its anticipation in the present" ("Foreword" xviii). Beck argues that modern societies are organized around risk, planning for the future rather than reacting to the present. "Risk, not war," he writes, "is the determining factor of power, identity and the future" (xxiii). Under neoliberalism, this emphasis on risk has meant that individuals are tasked with being always aware of and ready for the future, thinking at all times about how to prepare in the present for what might be ahead. This has especially factored into the development of and discourse around genetic testing, an issue to which Nikolas Rose pays close attention in *The Politics of Life Itself* (2007). Rose identifies the manner in which genomic discourse refers to individuals with a higher than average probability of contracting a disease as *genetically at risk*. This label, rather than "generate fatalism," Rose argues, "creates an obligation to act in the present in relation to the potential futures that now come into view," explicitly aligning genomics with the neoliberal risk discourse (107).

The discourse of risk, and the way in which it re-orders how individuals think about dangers especially in relation to their bodies, is explored in great detail in *The Circle* in relation to waste and filth. Late in the novel, when Mae has begun her life as a "fully transparent person," the narrator provides gory details about living as transparent over which other novels might have merely glossed, such as an answer to the question: What happens when she goes to the bathroom?

> Though Mae's transparency was complete, in that she could not turn off the visual or audio feeds at any time, there were a few exceptions, insisted upon by Bailey. One was during bathroom usage, or at least time spent on the toilet. The video feed was to remain on, because, Bailey insisted, the camera would be trained on the back of the stall door, so it hardly mattered. But the audio would be turned off, sparing Mae, and the audience, the sounds. (351-2)

Due to the Circle's seemingly boundless desire for knowledge and transparency—to the point that they deem it necessary to count the grains of sand in the Sahara Desert—it is important to draw attention to one of the only occasions that is not only deemed unworthy of transparency but in which transparency is outright denied. Take note of the way in which the narrator prefaces this exclusion with the then-qualified claim that "Mae's transparency was complete." Bookending this particular paragraph are two striking subversions: on the one hand, the reader is told a lie about the extent of Mae's transparency; and at the end of the paragraph, the narrator claims that Mae and her audience are "spar[ed]" what is euphemistically referred to as "the sounds." Not only is the audience in the story world denied the embarrassment of witnessing Mae's waste disposal; the reader is also denied the embarrassment of narratorial disclosure. It is as if any mention of filth is as traumatic as experiencing the real thing. This is not, however, the novel's

only demonstration of the Circle's aversion to all manner of filth and waste. Shortly after the narrator's euphemistic description of Mae's transparent bathroom visits, Mae visits Dr. Villalobos, who espouses the benefits of knowing all of the population's health information, citing a recent case in which influenza was discovered in an employee who was directed to miss work in order to prevent the disease from spreading. The doctor muses afterward, "If only we could prevent people from bringing germs *onto* campus, right? If they never left, getting dirty out there, then we'd be all set" (357). The "out there" where people are "getting dirty"—as if getting dirty correlates with contracting disease—is anywhere not within the Circle itself, setting up a binary wherein the Circle stands for cleanliness and the outside world stands for filth. The world outside the Circle is registered as a distinct risk to those on the Circle's campus. Avoiding this risk, then, requires that Circlers never leave the campus. In a review of the novel for *The New York Times*, Ellen Ullman writes, "Everyone inside the Circle is young and healthy; the outside is for the old and ill" ("Ring of Power"). In the novel, however, keeping everybody "young and healthy" involves an objectification of their bodies.

The terms *map* and *measure* crop up quite a lot throughout *The Circle*, as does the suggestion that the company is concerned with helping people reach their full potential. As a representation of the techno-utopian movement in contemporary America, the Circle is obsessed both with knowledge and potential. An employee at the Circle says to Mae, "We consider you a full, knowable human being of unlimited potential" (180). That this character pairs the terms "full" and "knowable" with the claim that Mae is someone with "unlimited potential" suggests that there exists something in the information stored in Mae's body that allows for the tapping of her unlimited potential—that if only Mae could be fully known, if her data could all be sorted, there would be no end to what she could do. William Davies calls this trend the quantified self

movement, a movement in which "individuals measure and report on various aspects of their private lives" (221). Davies reports that the movement "unearthed a surprising enthusiasm for self-surveillance that market researchers and behavioural scientists have carefully noted" (221). Davies's argument against such technologies reads almost like a description of Eggers's novel. Davies argues that all such measuring initiatives generally start as a means of understanding "human flourishing and progress," but they inevitably evolve into "a route to sell people stuff they don't need, work harder for managers who don't respect them and conform to policy objectives over which they have no say" (232-33). Similarly, all of the Circle's technological innovations start in the hands of the innovators and transfer to the hands of the capitalists.

Specifically in the context of bio-measurements in the novel, Eggers illustrates the manner in which technological innovations have worked to both manage people and exhort them to manage themselves. "Quantifying relations among mind, body and world," Davies writes, "invariably becomes a basis for asserting control over people and rendering their decisions predictable" (233). Mae is provided "a silver bracelet, about three inches wide" that tracks everything from her vital signs to the number of steps she takes (153). The doctor enumerates in detail all the different data that Mae's new watch tracks in a rather lengthy passage which I will quote in its entirety, as the effect on the reader in the novel is so strong that it should be clearly represented here as well:

> It'll collect data on your heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol, heat flux, caloric intake, sleep duration, sleep quality, digestive efficiency, on and on. A nice thing for the Circlers, especially those like you who might have occasionally stressful jobs, is that it measures galvanic skin response, which allows you to know when you're amped or anxious. When we see non-normative rates of stress in a Circler or a department, we can

> make adjustments to workload, for example. It measures the pH level of your sweat, so you can tell when you need to hydrate with alkaline water. It detects your posture, so you know when you need to reposition yourself. Blood and tissue oxygen, your red blood cell count, and things like step count. (154-5)

This is just one of many passages in the novel in which Eggers attempts to simulate for the reader the effect of data overload that Mae experiences. In the above passage alone, Mae is made aware of 14 new bits of information that she will now be monitoring, and if this information does not overload Mae, it certainly overloads the reader. The effect of this overload is achieved further when Eggers introduces the reader, and Mae as well, to terms most likely outside of his or her expertise: terms such as *heat flux, digestive efficiency,* and *galvanic skin response*. The message behind both this wall of text and the terms used is that the individual in Eggers's world is no longer an expert on his or her own body. Instead the individual's bodily awareness is outsourced to a device that transmits that information to someone who *can* understand it. Passages such as this one occur often and usually at moments in which something is happening in Mae's personal life as well, with the consequence that Mae embraces the overload as a means of escaping from thoughts that make her uncomfortable. Measurement is not limited to the body in Eggers's techno-utopia. The ideal of measurement naturally extends to all things, with the common purpose being that measurement allows for perfect knowledge. As Mae tellingly ventures to her viewers in a riff on Protagoras's famous quote, "Man is the measure of all things": "'More important for our purposes,' Mae said, opening the door, 'is that now, with the tools available, *humans* can *measure* all things'" (336, emphasis in the original).

In a later passage, the reader is confronted with a stream of Mae's thoughts in the form of a block of text spanning over two pages. In this scene, she is trying to increase her Participation

Rank (or PartiRank for short), which measures her participation in her social media. All the information for her Rank is tracked on the very same wrist device that tracks her health information:

> Her health stats added a few dozen more numbers, each of them giving her a sense of great calm and control. She knew her heart rate and knew it was right. She knew her step count, almost 8,200 that day, and knew that she could get to 10,000 with ease. She knew she was properly hydrated and that her caloric intake that day was within accepted norms for someone of her body-mass index. It occurred to her, in a moment of sudden clarity, that what had always caused her anxiety, or stress, or worry, was not any one force, nothing independent and external—it wasn't danger to herself or the constant calamity of other people and their problems. It was internal: it was subjective: it was *not knowing*. (194)

Eggers utilizes in this passage and others like it throughout the novel a visceral free-indirect presentation that both mimics and contradicts the more personal stream of consciousness style as it was traditionally used in modernist novels. If in its modernist manifestation, stream of consciousness was meant to convey to both the reader and the character alike a supreme reckoning with internal feeling whereby sensemaking was achieved via looking inward, Eggers modifies that literary tradition for a dystopian 21st-century America in which internality has taken a back seat to externality. In this passage, Eggers matches a stream of consciousness register with pacing that demands quick reading in a scene in which Mae is forced to reckon with her internal life, but his modification—the free-indirect point of view—makes external what should read as highly internal, and this modification of psychic distance is captured in the content as well. Of note is the form of the knowledge that catalyzes Mae's apparent epiphany.

The information that most matters to Mae, that contributes to her overall knowledge, is given to her by a device that, though intimately connected to her body, is also ultimately external to it. Contradicting Cederström and Spicer's arguments about the inward gaze fostered by positive thinking and self-help discourses (12)—arguments carried over from Christopher Lasch's analysis of contemporary narcissism—Eggers illustrates an internality that does not take the form of internality as such. Instead, Eggers describes an inward gaze the form of which comprises such external metrics as steps taken, calories consumed, water drunk, and social media posts "zinged." Mae even adopts the specialist language—terms like "caloric intake" and "body-mass index"—used by her doctor to characterize her psychic and bodily state, language that was previously unknown to her but which has nonetheless colonized her self-narration.

It seems rather obvious that the reader is not supposed to trust Mae's concluding self-assessment—her praise of knowing—here. As the novel progresses, episodes like these become longer and longer, more feverish and anxious, and are often followed by consequent episodes of existential dread, what Mae self-describes as a tear from which "she heard the screams of millions of invisible souls" (196). The reader comes to understand that the persistent impulse to improve herself—according to the Circle's logics—is what is actually driving Mae to more and more frequently experience these existential episodes. Eggers makes a convincing case in the novel that, for all the useful information that technologies can offer to individuals, there is something about the essence of humanity that cannot cope with such thorough transparency. There is a certain amount of *knowing* that might feel like a prerequisite for security, but it sits at the threshold of total existential panic. These technologies feed off an innate desire for safety and control, but their internal logics simply perpetuate that desire, creating a positive feedback loop the products of which are episodes such as those experienced by Mae—and artfully described in

Eggers's prose—in *The Circle*. In the next section, I will examine Richard Powers's *Gain*, a novel that picks up the existential issues Eggers raises but ties them in more completely to the pursuit of capitalism generally and the neoliberal form of capitalism specifically. In *Gain*—as in DeWitt's *Lightning Rods*—capitalism is always selling positive thinking, but Powers takes this logic to its existential roots.

Cleaning (to) Death: Neoliberalism, Positive Thinking, and the Dying Bod(e)y in Richard Powers's *Gain*

In an interview with Sven Birkerts about *Gain*, Richard Powers described what he saw as a timeless attitude toward the human body and its eventual death: "In knowing that your body will follow a certain course from infancy to grave, you recapitulate certain unchanging facts of human experience. Although we've tinkered with the statistics […] there's something about the inevitability of death" (Birkerts). The culture described in *Gain*'s America, however, is not so accepting of the body's fragility. Instead, Powers's sixth novel details the various ways that American culture tries to hide from the inevitability of death, particularly the manner in which capitalism operates in tandem with positive thinking to imagine life without death. Powers says about another of his novels, *Galatea 2.2* (1995)—but which he could easily be saying about *Gain* as well—"We have that sense of soul fastened to dying animal […] The point of Galatea is that it's the dying animal that makes the soul the soul" (Birkerts). Powers's answer to the attempted triumph over death is an appeal to a better form of living. He says in an interview with Kevin Berger, "We have to find beauty in the complexity and interaction, in the heft and weight and bruise of the world" (Berger). For Powers, beauty entails a departure from the distinctly consumerist model of kitsch living, one that seeks only pleasure and attempts to disregard that

which brings pain or discomfort. As he puts it in his interview with Birkerts, "I would say that you earn your right to feel good about the world by taking a full look at the worst" (Birkerts). Artistic beauty, for Powers, exists at the conjunction of pleasure and pain. As he illustrates in *Gain*, however, turn-of-the-millennium America is a country with a distinct distaste for pain.

The narrative of *Gain* is shared almost equally between the life-story of a New England soapmaking company, originally Clare and Sons, stretching from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth, and the last year of life for Laura Bodey, a woman born and raised in Clare's contemporary corporate headquarters in the fictional town of Lacewood, Illinois. Between these two narrative strands—and even sometimes interrupting either one—are various quotes from obscure real-world texts as well as fictional advertisements from Clare. In these advertisements, scattered throughout the novel and written with a recognizable optimistic flair, Powers illustrates the way in which capitalism is always selling positive thinking; it is always promising deliverance from our most basic fears while simultaneously stoking those fears so as to sell us the means of escape. The twin narrative style that Powers employs serves the purpose of comparing and contrasting a corporation to the human body. The rise of financialized capitalism under neoliberalism has seen an increased pressure on businesses to—seemingly infinitely—expand and increase profits. As Ehrenreich puts it, businesses in the new economy "have no alternative but to grow. If you don't steadily increase market share and profits, you risk being driven out of business or swallowed by a larger enterprise" (8). Their perpetual efforts to grow neglect the material limits to growth, however, a problem amplified when applied to the human body. Neoliberal discourse conceives individuals as micro-corporations, always self-improving so as to increase their "human capital." "As neoliberal rationality remakes the human being as human capital," Wendy Brown writes, the subject is meant to conceive of itself "as both a

member of a firm and as itself a firm, and in both cases as appropriately conducted by the governance practices appropriate to firms" (34). Individuals' tireless efforts to network and especially, in Cederström and Spicer's account, maximize wellness signal a parallel project of symbolic immortality. Continuing her criticism of neoliberal logics of limitless growth, Ehrenreich writes, "Perpetual growth, whether of a particular company or an entire economy, is of course an absurdity, but positive thinking makes it seem possible, if not ordained" (8). In *Gain,* Powers illustrates the contradictions both of a perilous pursuit of immortality and of the individual's ability to mirror corporations in that pursuit. Both on the level of the individual and of society at large, Powers sheds light on the many ways in which American culture, especially under the sway of capitalism, eschews thoughts of mortality as symbolized through everyday encounters with waste, dirt, disease, and more. Under criticism in *Gain* is the contemporary, neoliberal pressure on individuals to not only constantly self-improve but also take responsibility for their bad health and misfortune.

Despite the novel's considerable attention to the topics of death and cleanliness, few scholars have ventured analyses in regard to those topics. Both Ralph Clare and Ryan Brooks advance similar arguments about the novel's genealogy of liability on the individual and corporate levels, though Brooks engages with the novel's central motif of cleanliness more directly, figuring it as a representation of the Clare Corporation's ability to clean its hands of liability upon incorporating, a connection Powers himself establishes in the novel. For Clare and Brooks, the topic of death is important to the novel only insofar as the human body is made susceptible to it whereas the corporate body is not. On the topic of cleanliness, Derek Woods reads *immunity* as the unifying motif of the novel in his biopolitical and ecological critique in a manner more compelling than Brooks's analysis. However, in my reading, though immunity is a

striking metaphor and can be used to bring together many of the novel's disconnected scenes and parts, immunity itself seems too specific an analysis of the novel's dialectical treatment of cleanliness, filth, and waste. In the novel's treatment of neoliberal positive thinking's unique solutions to death anxiety, immunity and immunization are symptoms of the problem rather than the problems themselves. After all, soap does not immunize one from dirt but rather removes dirt that is already present. Further, just as soap is put to the task of removing waste and dirt from the body, this task of removal rather than prevention relates more directly to the narrative of Laura and the novel's critique of biopolitics. Crucial to my analysis is an understanding of the flaws embedded within neoliberal positive thinking's solution to death anxiety. Positive thinking, especially under the influence of neoliberal governmentality, offers a telos in regard to human progress and possibility that betrays a philosophical disposition towards death at odds with its inevitability. If neoliberal positive thinking seduces individuals into conceiving of their lives as immortality projects—analogous to the corporate endeavor of perpetual growth—the reality is that this pursuit is only ever achievable on the corporate level, and it is achievable only at the cost of individual health and happiness. The portrait *Gain* paints of turn-of-the-millennium America is of a society and culture that pathologically recoils at the thought of death, and this pathology is inscribed upon attitudes toward the body.

In keeping with the novel's primary theme of death and the anxiety that our impending deaths induce in us, Powers introduces Laura to the reader as she prepares herself for the funeral of her daughter's friend. "*Funerals are for the living*," Laura's first chapter opens: "They used to go to a funeral every other week, when she was little. Kind of gone out of fashion these days" (12). Important to note in this passage is that Laura reflects on her *attendance* at funerals as a child and as an adult rather than their relative occurrences. If attending funerals has "gone out of

fashion these days," it is not because they do not occur but rather because funerals, as very obvious reminders of mortality, are too difficult. Powers explicitly historicizes death anxiety in the attitude Laura's mother had toward funerals in contrast to her own attitudes: "She stares into the silvered glass, looking for herself at age ten. Hearing: *Funerals are for the living*. Thinking: *Funerals are for my mother*" (12). If Laura's mother was able to attend funerals, it is suggested here that this was due to her ability to face death, a feat of which Laura is far less capable. The novel makes clear that Laura's difficulties with funerals represent her more thoroughgoing difficulty with facing death. The passage continues as Laura thinks, "*Disease is just a passing holdover from when we lived wrong. It's all been a terrible mistake. My parents and their friends: the last generation that will have to die*" (13). Whereas, in Powers's history, death and funerals were more visible when Laura was younger—in the mid-century—now they are invisible. The funeral Laura is attending with her daughter Ellen is that of Ellen's friend, Nan. The narrator recounts, "Everyone knew, and no one admitted. Nan at the end, almost invisible" (14). Well before Laura has been diagnosed with ovarian cancer, death is presented as a problem not only for Laura but for late-century American culture generally.

In her fight with cancer, Laura grasps at anything that might rid her of the disease. Most consistently, however, she turns to visualization tapes and positive thinking exercises as a means of trying to control mentally what presents itself as a physical problem. *Gain* uses this practice to explore in detail the manner in which governmentality in the late twentieth century operates: a manner that is an extension of capitalism's logic but a modern phenomenon with its own particularities. Laura is roped in early to what is referred to in the novel as "the New Spirituality," paging through a magazine that describes the contemporary phenomenon, but this appears at first as a kind of one-off blip; the novel does not return to the topic of Laura's

spirituality until much later (27). Laura does, however, believe in one of the more radical theories of transhumanism, the offloading of individual consciousnesses as a solution to the disintegration of the material body: "At day's end, she thinks, we'll all be disembodied. Mobile microcomputer puppets doing our shopping and socializing. Human heads pasted onto modem bodies" (32).[7] In this passage, the novel illustrates the degree to which the body and its inherent susceptibility to disintegration plague Laura. Her longing for a bodiless future betrays her desire to overcome her animal nature. Whereas Laura has paid little attention to her body's upkeep, apparently already similar in appearance to her mother, her ex-husband Don has worked tirelessly to rebut the inevitability of his body's deterioration. "He's four years her senior," the narrator tells us, "but nobody ever thinks so. Their friends were always surprised, when they told their ages in public. He's kept himself up. That's the difference between them. Cross-training. Antioxidants. Halve your calorie intake and eliminate your saturated fats" (43). Though Laura never matches Don's intense dedication to endless physical self-improvement, she does eventually take complete responsibility for her own health, taking up positive thinking on the suggestion from her doctor. One passage reads: "She closes her eyes and tries to collect herself. To remember the voice on those cancer tapes […] perform all the visualization tricks she's training in […] 'Surround the tumor in a solid, silver casing, and just throw it away…'" (156). Laura's doctor prescribes these visualization techniques under the premise that a positive attitude will bolster her immune system, her only remaining defense against the spread of her cancer. Another passage reads: "She breathes from her stomach, as the self-cure tapes tell her to. 'I want you to leave me'" (185). Similarly, Don instructs Laura at her most fatalistic, "Fight it. Attitude

[7] Though Powers never really returns to this idea in *Gain*, he does dedicate special attention to transhumanism in a later novel, *Generosity* (2009), which I will address in the next chapter.

is everything, La. The mind is your best chemo. You have to picture yourself well again, and then you will be" (264).

In a striking scene late in the novel, Laura uses positive thinking-esque visualization techniques to mentally remove the cancerous cells from her body. Laura imagines all the dirty cells covering her organs,

> Then she releases a horde of animated rug cleaners, plaque fighters, scrubbing bubbles, those enzymes that come on like bug-eyed brushes, chasing the world's deviate growths down the kitchen drain. This crack regiment of mixed specialists goes over and over her cartoon insides, washing, tumbling, coursing through all her organs' nooks and crannies, until it leaves every internal surface with that see-yourself shine. (275)

This last phrase in particular, "that see-yourself shine," suggests that individuals are not only induced to think of their bodies as objects and problems but also made to think of the solutions to those problems in explicitly capitalist terminology. This phrase seems almost entirely lifted from a soap commercial—the tagline to some phantom cleaning product. The whole passage even reads like the narrativization of a commercial. It is as if Laura has no other way of imagining the cleaning of her body than through visualizations that are mere amalgamations of television advertisements, or the print advertisements that recur throughout *Gain*. Laura's reliance on corporatized jargon in this passage aligns with the novel's larger historical interest in the neoliberal form of capitalism and the way it has come to form subjects.

Gain does not dramatize what has become known as "the neoliberal turn" in economic and social policy, but to anyone familiar with this periodization, the descriptions in the novel of distinct periods of capitalism clearly point to such a contemporary political specificity. Even before the lifespan of Clare, soap and its use were a matter of specific importance to the public

presentation of bodies. While Powers illustrates in his history of the Clare Corporation that capitalism has always involved external pressure—via corporations—on the individual to think more concertedly about presentation, the modern turn to neoliberalism has involved both an intensification of this imagistic obsession as well as a more thorough individualization of one's self-protection. Powers directly connects Clare's history with the history of capitalist responsibility. In what looks like a business card for the company, when it is named S, R, & B Clare, there is a tagline that reads, "He that hath clean hands shall grow stronger and stronger" (79). In a generational link, the following passage—falling within Laura's narrative—proceeds the previous business card in an unmistakably neoliberal tenor: "All the magazines agree: health care is now the patient's business. Responsibility falls squarely on the care receiver. And there she was, sleeping on the job" (80). Laura internalizes the neoliberal narrative of personal responsibility, though the novel will eventually show this to be an unfair predicament, as it is not in fact Laura's fault that she contracted cancer but rather Clare's, whose insecticide is shown to be responsible for dozens of cases of cancer in Lacewood. Nonetheless, the neoliberal project of *making responsible* works: "She just wants to know how much of this is her fault. Whether she should have done something. Might still do something. Whether she would have had to go through this even if she lived better" (84). In a cruel irony, Clare's "cleaning product," the insecticide, does not make Laura stronger but rather kills her: she is literally cleaned to death.

In the novel, the corporation desires both metaphoric and literal immortality. The central motif of *gain* and its desired perpetuity is just such a metaphoric immortal pursuit. Though, of course, perpetual gain has always been the goal for the capitalist project, the impossibility of its achievement has never been quite so clear—and yet its pursuit so willfully engaged—as in the present day. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the rise of finance capitalism has been

accompanied by the attendant anxiety of short-term profit incentives. For many companies, the only means of achieving these profits have been the permanent elimination of employees along with the elimination of permanent employment. At least in *Personal Days* and *Then We Came to the End*, the confrontation with impermanent employment both symbolized and *felt like* a confrontation with mortality: employment insecurity takes on the feel of ontological insecurity under the totalizing force of neoliberalism. In *Gain*, however, Powers focuses on the corporate point of view rather than that of the employee. For Powers, the precarization of employment secures the immortality of the corporation. In his interview with Berger, Powers sums up his thematic concerns in *Gain*:

> In a sense, the book about business becomes about human desire, about teleology. What kind of world are we making, and when will it be enough? And my answer is, so long as the world that we're creating is about satisfying appetites, it will never be enough. Because the physiology of appetite is not an absolute function, it's a relative one. What we want is what we can't have. (Berger)

Powers shows in *Gain* that a book about business does not "become" a book about human desire; rather, the book about business is *always* about human desire. What Powers illustrates in the novel is that corporate desires are very similar to human desires, but the former is far more capable of achieving those desires than the latter, and at the latter's expense as well.

In America at the turn of the millennium, Powers suggests in *Gain*, the only thing we cannot have is that which sits at the core of the capitalist project: the triumph over our animal natures. Because capitalism has given us so much, because it has given us so many things, all that is left to want is the desublimated escape from death, one which is promised often literally by positive thinking and symbolically by neoliberal thought. This is part of the function of

Powers's historicization of capitalism in the novel. Although so much changes over the course of the Clare Corporation's life, its sublimated appeal to the consumer's desire to overcome death remains constant. At the end of the novel, with the heft of the lawsuit weighing down Clare's current CEO, Franklin Kennibar, he is given the task of making a case for the company's continued existence in a televised interview. In response to the question, "What is [business's] purpose? What do we want it to do?" Kennibar jots down a long, spiraling response, making reference to the perpetual pursuit of profit, the ideal of utilitarianism, the control of nature, among many others (398). After he has jotted all this down, "Kennibar thinks of adding: 'To beat death,' but he's afraid he'll forget what he meant when the cameras roll this afternoon" (398). What is clear, though, is that what he jotted down previously serves metaphorically to achieve the one thing he leaves out. In the Clare Corporation's last chapter in the novel, Powers puts in no uncertain terms what he sees as the heart of the corporate endeavor: to beat death, particularly its own.

For modern readers, the narrative style that Powers adopts in *Gain* may come across as antiquated. In my reading, the anachronistic, omniscient third-person narrator performs a modified version of the role of Adam Smith's famous "invisible hand," as analyzed by Foucault in his lectures on biopolitics. In *The Wealth of Nations,* Smith describes the role of the economic agent: "he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention" (456). It is from this quote and Smith's conceptualization of economic agents in a capitalist society that I argue Powers derives the central theme and title of his novel. Foucault analyzes Smith's passage as follows: "if the totality of the process eludes each economic man, there is however a point where the whole is completely transparent to a sort of gaze of someone whose invisible hand, following the logic of

this gaze and what it sees, draws together the threads of all these dispersed interests" (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 279). If we read Laura as one such "economic [wo]man," who understands very little about the economic world in which she is an agent, the narrator performs for the reader the role of making sense of that world; the narrator "draws together the threads" of the Clare Corporation's journey to monopoly and the manner in which that journey affects one economic woman. Foucault writes of the relationship between national and global economies and individuals under neoliberalism: "Economic growth and only economic growth should enable all individuals to achieve a level of income that will allow them the individual insurance, access to private property, and individual or familial capitalization with which to absorb risks" (144). In *Gain*, Powers stages the contradictions of a world in which capitalism demands ever-increasing rates of profit. The increased productivity of the Clare Corporation results in the elimination of Laura's ability to reproduce. Capital reproduction is shown to be diametrically opposed to natural reproduction. If Smith suggested that the world gains when individuals gain—that the invisible hand guides economic agents and the world they freely inhabit toward progress—Powers uses his invisible hand to steer the reader toward the contemporary reality that neoliberal subjects of interest, those economic men who intend only their own gains, are creating a world of atomized responsibility that does not fulfill Smith's teleological promises of progress.

Despite his considerable critique of the neoliberal sterilization of death, Powers is hesitant to end his novel with death. As Sander L. Gilman argues in "Representing Dead and Dying Bodies," deaths in literature are represented in one of two ways: "(1) they can either follow the Judaeo-Christian tradition of treating death as symbolic (or allegorical) and/or aestheticized (or denied)—which constitutes a repression of the reality of death […] or (2) they can follow a Hellenistic tradition of realistic […] death" (150). Though it seems that Clare is in

its final death throes with the lawsuit brought against the company on the grounds that its chemical dumping caused a slew of cancer diagnoses, the reader surely understands that the company will live on in some form, continue to push its personal boulder up prosperity's mountain. If the company seems headed toward death, the reader never actually experiences that death. It stays alive purely through the absence of its end. In a similar way, Laura's death does not even end her own narrative strand. Rather the reader is told that her son, Tim, is creating a company dedicated to the eradication of cancer—along with the possibility of eradicating countless other diseases. Tim moves on from the virtual empires of his computer strategy games to an attempted conquest of nature through his project to cure cancer. It is left purposefully ambiguous, I would argue, whether this conclusion to the novel functions as critique or not. Is this the final word on humans' uncanny and ill-conceived imagination of their eventual transcendence of the body? Or is it a positive evaluation of their ability to dream up solutions to seemingly insurmountable obstacles? Is Powers problematizing the fact that, in the novel, a disease created by a corporation is only cured by another corporation? In her reading of the ending, Heise writes, "This new corporation may be able to cure the cancer the old one caused, but in that very process it can only worsen the other cancer that is incorporated business itself" (767). Expanding on Heise's reading, I argue that the novel concludes on a continuation of the capitalist immortality project it diagnoses, and nowhere is this immortality project more pronounced than in the novel's historicization of the Clare Corporation's number one product.

The history of soap and Clare's monopolization thereof stands in for a history of capitalism more generally. When Clare and Sons discovers the financial possibilities behind soap-mongering, it is described by the narrator that soap "cured an itch that Americans did not even know they had until the scratch announced it" (20). While a number of scholars have drawn

attention to the way in which the Clare Corporation functions as an allegory for the history of capitalism, no critic has extended that allegory to the chief product that Clare sells from the beginning of the novel to the end. Powers uses the central product in the novel, soap, to make grand claims about the capitalist project. That is, if soap is continually used in the novel to symbolize purity and flight from decay, waste, and other death-symbols, Powers imagines American capitalism analogously as a distinct outlet for death denial. Powers charges his descriptions of Clare's soap and its enormous popularity with existential significance. Soap is civilization's lasting symbol for immortality and its attainment, a means of ridding oneself of the sort of waste product that brings about and symbolizes disintegration. Indeed, soap was man's early realization of the importance of bacteria in the role of disease contraction. As the narrator tells us, "Soap is a desperately ordinary substance to us. It is almost as omnipresent as air and water. It is so common that it is difficult to imagine life without it. Yet soap is probably the greatest medical discovery in history" (21). The symbolic power of soap is nailed down early in the novel: "For if any healing charm against disintegration existed, it was light and scent" (50). However, the novel is not chiefly concerned with soap on its own, but rather what the consumption of soap illustrates about consumerism more broadly. Powers writes, "It's as if buying and eternal life were somehow flip sides of the same thing" (306). For Powers, consumption has always been about avoiding thoughts of death: "For what has any customer ever wanted but to purchase time's defeat and raise yesterday's dead?" (162) Soap provides this sense of invulnerability, this sense that we can somehow beat back the inevitability of time: "Candles and soap had once been humankind's best weapon against time" (91). As Powers writes early on about the symbolic power of soap as a means of control over waste, "Clare's Soap offered the old quantity of self-reliance by another, more manicured avenue. It emitted a

whiff of purity that one could smell even above the crust of horse droppings that fouled ankles from Noddle's Island to Southie" (48). This antagonism between "a whiff of purity" and "the crust of horse droppings" is important. Not only is soap made dichotomous to feces as a representation of abject material; the feces itself is associated not with humans—whose waste would probably also be fouling the air—but with animals. In *Gain,* soap is a stand-in for the larger human desire to control our animal natures—and the fouler aspects of embodied existence—through whatever means possible. This desire for control is thematically linked in the novel to positive thinking and its analogous belief in the power of will to overcome the confines of materiality.

If at one point in the history of American consumerism it was enough simply to be clean, *Gain* suggests that this is no longer true. Though Laura's narrative strand is the only one in which the reader sees corporate America from the consumer's point of view, there is a sense in which all the years of the Clare Corporation's emphases upon consumer responsibilization have come to a head, so to speak. That is, Powers delineates the contemporary period—narrated in the novel only through Laura—by the degree to which individuals have internalized the growing narrative of personal responsibility that, in Powers's historicization, clearly has its roots in the very origins of American capitalism. If the characters in the novel's contemporary period seem especially anxious about death, this is because capitalism's exploitation of death anxiety has achieved considerable success. Even in the history of the Clare Corporation, Powers illustrates the paradoxical success the company's model has achieved in its history. Powers evidences this with a passage in which the company's crowning achievement, Native Balm, is deemed by the consumer too close to nature and thus too close to death. When Clare enters the twentieth century, the customer base no longer wants Native Balm, with its strictly organic and entirely

natural composition: “Native Balm bespoke a Nature pungent, arcane, and enchanted. Snowdrop delineated the *new* face of Nature: immaculate, measured, managed; purity incarnate” (268). For Powers, the problem of death anxiety is a problem that has only grown worse over the history of capitalism. The passage continues: “The new woman seemed to call out for something more wholesome, something more elegant, more refined, *whiter*. Snowdrop was as white as any imagined future” (268). While there was a time that people wanted something distinctly natural, Americans in the twentieth century want no reminder of a nature unchained and uncontrolled by human restraints. The ultimate sign of civilization becomes the sterilization of nature. This theme reaches its logical endpoint, however, when the sterilization of nature appears in the form of a sterilization of natural reproduction and even the premature destruction of natural life.

There is in *Gain* a rather shrouded gendered argument that may itself be an allegory for mankind’s attempted triumph over nature. The Clare Corporation, founded by three brothers, goes on to cause the destruction of a woman’s ability to reproduce. Though it may be simplistic, and even rely on some stereotypical conceptions of gender, Powers suggests in Laura’s ovarian cancer the fated role of runaway capitalism to ultimately destroy natural life. For all its promises to overcome a natural existence supposedly hampering human flourishing, Powers illustrates how capitalism ultimately dooms humanity. To return, however, to the previous passage, along with a gendered analysis it is clear Powers also intends on some level a racial element to the rhetoric put forward by the Clare Corporation’s transition from “Native Balm” to “Snowdrop.” The replacement of nature—and the Native American face that adorned the Native Balm packaging—with an unnatural whiteness in the case of the soaps could surely be analogized with the larger American project of substituting the country’s “natural” inhabitants for the white imperial face of civilization. Whatever connotations Powers ascribes to this allegory, however,

are ultimately tangential to the novel's primary concerns. In the next section, I will turn to a poetry collection by Claudia Rankine, who makes a more deliberate effort to deal with America's racial past and present.

The Transparent and Dying Black Body: Positive Thinking and Post-Racial Politics in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Positive psychology has its own conflicted relationship to race. While the discipline's theoretical framework upholds the social and economic status quo and therefore implicitly turns a blind eye to the troubled race relations in America, Martin Seligman is explicit in his stance on identity politics. In *Authentic Happiness*, the foundational text for positive psychology, Seligman condemns identity politics rooted in an evaluation of America's past and present human rights abuses. He writes, "Leaders who incessantly remind their followers of a long history of outrages (real and imagined) their nation has suffered produce a vengeful, violent populace" (76). He particularly identifies "American demagogues who play the race card, invoking reminders of slavery […] at every opportunity," arguing that these demagogues "create the same vengeful mindset in their followers [… and] wound gravely the very group they wish to help" (76). Generally, the term "race card" in American politics is reserved for the most conservative of politicians and media outlets. Seligman's condemnation here is targeted—in his estimation—at a brand of politics that focuses on the past rather than looking toward the future. The solution to a harmful past is, according to Seligman, "to change your thoughts by rewriting your past: forgiving, forgetting, or suppressing bad memories" (76). In *Citizen*, Claudia Rankine does something very different from forgiving, forgetting, or suppressing; instead she archives and confronts.

Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (2014) are both subtitled *An American Lyric*, and both collections engage with and modify that poetic genre in interesting and singular ways. Both collections are also deeply engaged with the problem of death—not only how the specter of death has a peculiar hold on American society but also how black Americans are uniquely subject to premature death. In *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine writes about the governmental exploitation of death anxiety. "Hegel argued," the speaker relates, "that death is used as a threat to keep citizens in line. The minute you stop fearing death you are no longer controllable by governments and councils" (84). As I have already discussed in this chapter, Foucault sees a departure from this brand of governmentality in the last two centuries, seeing a government *through life* rather than *from death*. Foucault's analysis, however, misses the mark when considering the extrajudicial murders of unarmed black men and women by police officers. Writing of *Citizen*, Shermaine M. Jones coins the term "affective asphyxia" to describe the manner in which "black life [is] lived in the precarious state between life and death" (38).[8] The speaker(s) in *Citizen* often refers to black individuals as "black bodies," a term intended not to objectify black people but rather to represent them narratively as they are treated societally. In the collection, black subjects are often treated as a mass by their white interlocutors, one individual black body interchangeable for another. There is a desire for reconciliation in the collection, a desire to look past minor altercations and mistreatments in favor of optimism. This desire is importantly overcome, however, and Rankine presents the reader with an array of "negative" historical events. This presentation, in my view, is an attempt to appeal to readers'

[8] Jones's coinage is a reference to the choking death of Eric Garner by New York City police on July 17, 2014. Garner's plea shortly before dying, "I can't breathe," became a rallying cry in the Black Lives Matter movement.

sympathies as well as to resist the growing strain of thought within American conservative politics to forget about race, a strain that imagines the nation as distinctly post-racial.[9]

Citizen catalogues both the American compulsion to positive thinking in light of a racist past and present as well as the antithetical anecdotal and historical evidence that necessarily questions positive thinking's comforting narrative. To describe everyday encounters with casual racism, Rankine's speaker mostly uses the second-person point of view, an effort to—as closely as possible—mimic the feeling of experience in the reader. By the speaker's account, "before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it had to be experienced, it has to be seen" (9). One must be forced to ask, "What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?" (9) The use of several pronouns in this passage is something that features in several pivotal passages in the collection, and it seems intended to give the experience of everyday racism the quality of *noise*. The question of where an offensive utterance originated is moot, because the effect is omnipresence. Pronouns are always shifting, and names are impossible to pin down. "You can't remember her name," we are told in the opening piece, "Mary? Catherine?" (5). This girl, whatever her name is, requests to cheat on tests using the speaker's answers. Meanwhile, "You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person" (5). Incidents such as this, referred to as *microaggressions*, abound in the novel, and in my analysis they are fundamental to understanding the relation of Rankine's collection to positive thinking and its involvement in contemporary racial politics. In *Citizen* the drama of American positive thinking

[9] Joseph R. Winters notes the language used by conservative politicians—specifically John McCain and Rudy Giuliani—after the election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008, language that used President Obama as an example of America's triumph over its past (1-4).

is played out in: the declared innocence of an "otherwise non-racist" individual accused of committing a microaggression; the social desire to imagine a post-racial politics; and the idea of moving toward the future by never risking the glance backward to the past. Chester Pierce first defined *microaggressions* as "subtle, stunning, often automatic and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put-downs' of blacks by offenders" (Pierce et al. 66). For Rankine, microaggressions are vitally important to both comprehending and misunderstanding racism in its current historical manifestations. In an interview with Lauren Berlant for *BOMB Magazine*, Rankine says, "It seems obvious, but I don't think we connect microaggressions that indicate the lack of recognition of the black body as a body to the creation and enforcement of laws" (Berlant). Rankine here points to the way in which microaggressions play a pivotal role in America's ongoing racial dilemma. They are irrevocably linked to a history of racism that has merely been sublimated, so that one is not necessarily referred to with a racist epithet but rather mistaken for a friend's black maid (Rankine 7) or avoided on public transportation (12).

Whereas Seligman reaches toward a positive future through a negation of the past, Rankine catalogues history—a history composed of both concrete historical "events," such as the highly publicized deaths of black men, and personal anecdotes about everyday encounters with racism—so as to move forward without repeating it. One passage in the collection reads, "You like to think memory goes far back though remembering was never recommended. Forget all that, the world says. The world's had a lot of practice. No one should adhere to the facts that contribute to narrative" (61). While "the world" argues that moving forward requires forgetting, Rankine illustrates the power of memory, the kind of memory against which positive thinking militates. Rankine's poetic history concretizes what Seligman would make ethereal. Black Lives Matter, an organization that draws attention to the unjust murders of black American citizens,

issued a statement following the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States. For BLM, Trump's election clearly signaled American ambivalence to white supremacy, what they refer to as "a farce that persuaded some to believe we were living in a post-racial America while simultaneously rolling back the rights of black people and other people of color" (Black Lives Matter, quoted in Morrison). Similarly, Michelle Alexander, in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012), sheds light on the manner in which racist governmental structures have deftly reinstituted early-20th-century Jim Crow-era incarceration policies while maintaining a veneer of non-politics. Seligman seems to betray this desire for post-racial politics in his suggestion that playing "the race card" is absurd and inherently reliant on specifically historical transgressions. *Citizen,* however, very clearly defies this impulse in American politics. Rankine's catalogue of microaggressions attests to an impossibility of imagining an already existing post-racial America. Such aggressions, however micro, necessarily remind the aggressed individual of the historical significance of skin color, of the prevailing importance of one's body over one's subjectivity.

The sections on microaggressions in the collection precede the sections on black deaths to establish not a chronological connection or even a hierarchy but rather a thematic through-line, a sort of logical connection between one way of racism playing out and another. Bella Adams writes of the microaggressions documented in *Citizen* that they "go by almost unnoticed because they are built into institutions and everyday life, to the extent that they have become commonplace" (55). Following a poem about Trayvon Martin's death, Rankine reproduces John Lucas's *Public Lynching* (91), in which Lucas has taken a historical photograph of a 1930s lynch mob and photoshopped the hanging black victims out of the picture. In this piece, the reader is reminded of what whitewashing history really looks like. To deny America's racist history is to

erase from the public record the senseless destruction of countless individuals. A gruesome communal homicide becomes a summer picnic.[10] And it is clear in Rankine's collection that the effort to push away a racist history is tied to an effort to push black bodies out of consciousness altogether. Much like Powers's novel, Rankine's collection is a kind of perpetual connection-making device, bringing together infinite loose threads of contemporary black American life. One poem acts as a living catalogue of black Americans lost to police brutality. It begins with the line, "In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis," followed by a dozen identical lines with different names committed to memory (134). After the last name on the list, the list continues with the line "In Memory," which repeats until the bottom of the page, the text slowly losing its saturation until its final iteration at the bottom of the page is barely legible (134). While this line repeats to provide space for additional names—every edition of *Citizen* has added to this list of black victims—its slow fade down the page suggests that a continually bolstered memory is in a perpetual war with America's larger pursuit of memory loss on the topic of the nation's racist past and present. Pretending that we are beyond identity politics requires that we erase all the history leading up to the current moment. In defiance of Seligman's suggestion to forget the past, Lucas's altered photograph prompts the viewer to try to forget the hanging black bodies.

The speaker of *Citizen* introduces early on a positive thinking trope that animates the rest of the collection. After vomiting, the speaker tells the reader, "You are reminded of a conversation you had recently, comparing the merits of sentences constructed implicitly with 'yes, and' rather than 'yes, but.' You and your friend decided that 'yes, and' attested to a life with no turn-off, no alternative routes" (8). The origins of the phrase "yes, and" are in the world

[10] Adams writes about this picture in the collection, "Even though the black men are blacked out of Lucas' altered image so that we cannot see them, they […] still remain visible—to the white crowd and in our memory (of the unaltered photograph)" (65).

of improvisational comedy, where actors are set the task of always accepting and building from suggestions made by their co-stars. It has also been adopted within the business world as well as self-help to teach individuals not only to say "yes" to whatever is put in front of them but also to build from it. The best-selling self-help series *Chicken Soup for the Soul* has an edition subtitled *The Power of Yes!: 101 Stories about Adventure, Change and Positive Thinking* (2018) by Amy Newmark, and psychologist Kate F. Hayes published an article in *Psychology Today* titled "Yes, And: Accepting Unexpected Realities Lets Us Be Open to Further Exploration," in which she argues that "'Yes, and' is relevant for us all, whether we are capital-*P* Performers or 'merely' living our lives" (Hayes).[11] The concept of saying "yes" to life is also dramatized in the best-selling memoir *Yes Man* (2005) by Danny Wallace, which was adapted for the screen in 2008 under the same name and starring Jim Carrey. If self-help imagines "yes, and" as a freeing mechanism for individual creativity and flourishing, the speaker in *Citizen* is more doubtful. The speaker instead sees someone who stays in a lane and not only moves forward but also only ever in one direction. A "yes, and" person, according to the speaker, has "no turn-off, no alternative routes," and if this is appealing to positive thinking, it suggests someone who never has the luxury of looking critically at the options in front of them. They are propelled forward, their movement determined by an invisible force. This temporality is then adopted within the collection, many sentences or lines starting with the words "Yes, and" in a manner that suggests a subject being pulled inexorably to and through events over which he or she has no power. It is

[11] There are countless articles written about applying "yes, and" principles to business management. Notable ones include: a *Huffington Post* article by Karen Hough (founder of a business consulting firm called ImprovEdge) titled "'Yes, But'—The Evil Twin to 'Yes, And'"; Bob Kulhan's article for *Big Think*, titled "Why 'Yes, and…' Might Be the Most Valuable Phrase in Business"; and Karen Robson et al.'s article in the journal *Business Horizons,* titled "'Yes, and…': What Improv Theater Can Teach Service Firms."

as if black Americans are pulled through history rather than having a determining power over it.[12]

History plays a major role in *Citizen*. In one scene, the speaker introduces the idea of a "self self" and a "historical self" (14). These two selves are reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois's description of *double consciousness*, the term he used to describe the experience of being a hybrid citizen: an African American. For Du Bois, double consciousness described the historical antithesis, the "warring ideals," between *African* and *American* that rages within black subjects in the United States (3). The difference between the self self and the historical self, according to the speaker of *Citizen*, is: "By this she means you mostly interact as friends with mutual interest and, for the most part, compatible personalities; however, sometimes your historical selves, her white self and your black self, or your white self and her black self, arrive with the full force of your American positioning" (14). Bonds forged over mutual interests between individuals of different races necessarily experience ruptures predetermined by those racial differences and their physical prehistories. These ruptures, microaggressions that might otherwise be categorized as "misunderstandings" (14) between friends, remind one that before one was an "I," one was always already "we." The black body as a historical object of violence and oppression annihilates the desired specificity of any individual black body's capacity for subjectivity. In an earlier scene, the speaker describes the racialized subject trapped within the experience of a microaggression in dramatic terms: "If this were a domestic tragedy, and it might well be, this would be your fatal flaw—your memory, vessel of your feelings" (7). This analysis, however, purposefully misses the mark. It is not, of course, the subject's memory at fault, even if it

[12] In her influential book *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe writes of contemporary black subjectivity that "our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery" (8).

nonetheless feels that way. The idea of "memory" functions multiply here. For the speaker, the fault of memory is one's inability to forget or let go of what could be dismissed as a minor misunderstanding—the fact that "you never called her on it (why not?) and yet, you don't forget" (7). Left unsaid in this passage is a gap that will be filled in later in the collection: the idea that memory is both individual and collective. Memory is a specific problem for the racialized subject, because one is forced to remember the historical context into which one's body has been violently situated when confronted with the dehumanization of microaggressions. For the speaker, the psychological toll of microaggressions plays out physiologically as well, and this toll makes the subject of these aggressions incapable of merely forgetting and moving on in the manner desired by the larger positive thinking culture. The speaker counters the desire to forget the past: "The world is wrong. You can't put the past behind you. It's buried in you; it's turned your flesh into its own cupboard. Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you" (63). Even if the racialized individual's memory can be judged by a third party as not in itself a flaw, the speaker describes how it is necessarily felt as such. Memory and history are painful, but it is necessary to keep them alive so that suffering is made visible.

The speaker shows through the experience of dozens of recorded microaggressions that one's memory becomes a hindrance to one's ability to live happily, if even just to live sanely. The racialized individual is always set the task, when caught within a microaggression, of letting go of the ill feelings thrust upon him or her:

> Feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go. Come on. Come on. Come on. In due time the ball is going back and forth over the net. Now the sound can be turned back down. Your fingers cover your eyes, press them deep into their sockets—too much

> commotion, too much for a head remembering to ache. Move on. Let it go. Come on. (66)

In this scene the language of positive thinking invades the aggressed psyche. Moving on and letting go become easier solutions than looking suffering in the face, but the collection does not end on this note. Instead it closes with a prose poem from the perspective of a woman telling a story to her lover. The lover asks the speaker of the poem, "Tell me a story," to which the speaker responds with a story about sitting in her car in a parking lot outside of a tennis court. While she sat there, "A woman pulled in and started to park her car facing mine" (159). When they saw each other, however, the other woman immediately "backed up and parked on the other side of the lot" (159). Desiring to "[follow] her to worry my question," the speaker instead chooses to go about her day (159). The lover asks after the end of the story, "Did you win?", to which the speaker responds, "It wasn't a match […] It was a lesson" (159). What she means by this is unclear. Mary-Jean Chan wonders in her essay on *Citizen*, "Does the speaker imply a lesson learnt by all parties, or simply one which the black body learns over and over, since he/she is always the one who has more to lose?" (160). I am inclined, given the overarching pessimism in Rankine's collection, to assume that the latter is the case. The lasting message in this poem is indicated in the second line: "I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don't know how to end what doesn't have an ending" (159). This line, with its breathless progression through pronouns that might as well address all of America, signals the speaker's exhaustion not only with racism in America—especially in the work required to imagine optimistically and/or hopefully its conclusion—but also metafictionally with how to "end" a collection of essayistic poems *about* racism in America. Though the speaker seems to desire hope, she resolves that this is a nearly impossible stance, given all she has experienced. Instead, all she can do is tell the

stories, which stands in direct conflict with the impulse to "move on" expressed earlier. Importantly, the exhaustion both read and felt by the reader throughout the collection does not induce in the speaker a desire to either move on or forget. The gesture at the end of the collection to both remember and recount another microaggression is a vital act of resistance that signals a disposition to the world characterized by neither hope/optimism nor despair exclusively. Rather, the tone with which the collection both grapples and eventually ends is akin to what Joseph R. Winters describes as "hope draped in black," a term he arrives at via Theodor Adorno's thoughts on hope and melancholy in *Aesthetic Theory* and that Winters describes as a theory "of hope and futurity […] mediated by melancholy" (6).[13] This kind of hope for a better future is balanced by an accounting of suffering, an accounting that Rankine finds lacking in American culture at large.

In an especially haunting part of the collection, Rankine showcases the manner in which the larger white and indifferent culture can overlook the tragedies specifically visited upon black Americans. One poem about halfway through the collection is a collage of news coverage by CNN on Hurricane Katrina. Throughout the poem are messages that range from overtly apolitical—attributing the chaos and suffering merely to the careless destruction of a natural disaster—to overtly racist—suggesting that those people forced from their homes into a football stadium "were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them," as second lady Barbara Bush put it (85). Because the racist element of this line is fairly obvious, I will point to the way in which the line more subversively describes the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina as an *opportunity* for the "underprivileged," as if a natural (and unnatural) disaster could be spun

[13] Winters' term "hope draped in black"—otherwise referred to in his writing as "melancholic hope"—brings to mind Cornel West's concept of "the tragicomic" in "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization," an essay that appears in the book he co-authored with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Future of the Race* (1996).

optimistically. The speaker summarizes the coverage: "The fiction of the facts assumes innocence, ignorance, lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions of a certain time and place" (83). The truth, however, is that the suffering inflicted on the residents of New Orleans and surrounding areas was explicitly political, the federal government not only ignoring warnings about the hurricane's impending danger but also withholding vital relief efforts in the days immediately following the natural disaster.[14]

In the speaker's descriptions of Hurricane Katrina—its sufferers and its spectators—one is reminded of Kanye West's exclamations during NBC's *A Concert for Hurricane Relief*. Kanye's declaration, "George Bush hates black people," punctured the post-racial spectacle otherwise on display. Ismail Muhammad writes of Kanye's display within the larger framework of NBC's whitewashed telethon:

> Watching the telethon, you get the sense that it was meant to subsume the racialized particularity of New Orleans's tragedy beneath a patina of corporatized, race blind, and false universalism. Celebrities read sanitized scripts while, behind them, screens flash footage of Louisiana's devastated coastline. But the landscape is curiously bereft of the hurricane's primary victims: black Americans. It's a kind of toothless sentimentality through which a corporate media outlet simultaneously obscures its complicity with a political infrastructure for which black silence is the modus operandi, and reinforces that silence through the disappearing of black victims from the landscape.

The spectacle of the telethon reads as overtly apolitical, and the outcry after Kanye's outburst solidified this ethos. Though the producers included Kanye's improvised diatribe about news coverage of Hurricane Katrina in the west coast rebroadcast of the telethon, they edited out his

[14] For more on this subject, see Henry Giroux's article, "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability."

final and most powerful statement, "George Bush hates black people." In my reading, these erasures—of both the racialized specificity of Katrina's victims and West's powerful indictment—represent a cultural desire to, in Rankine's words, "move on" from the history of racialized violence in America. Much as positive thinking goads the individual to correct his own negativity, Kanye's "negative" comment was stricken from the record, and the telethon's coverage of the disaster left out of its footage the racialized particularity of the disaster's victims. Rankine's quotations of CNN's coverage and NBC's de-raced telethon illustrate the way in which post-racial politics operate via an explicit erasure or ignorance of suffering. Considering Rankine's attention to erasure both in the poem on Hurricane Katrina and in the collection at large, it is curious that she leaves out Kanye's outburst and the damage control enacted after it, seeing as Kanye's penetration into the de-raced space of the telethon coverage is the most popularly recognizable instance of that natural disaster's explicit racialization—and consequent de-racialization.[15] Perhaps his more recent alignment with radical conservative politics was territory too treacherous and rife with contradiction to venture.

The cataloguing of suffering that Rankine's approach to politics requires, however, has the potential to foreclose the possibility of a better future, at least according to some. In Leszkiewicz's interview with Rankine, Leszkiewicz wonders, considering *Citizen*'s descriptions of the black body determined by history, "If this is true, does Rankine still feel hopeful?" (19). Rankine responds cordially enough to this question, saying, "I don't think I would be talking to you, or writing what I write, if I didn't feel hopeful. I do think we are making progress. Just not at the rate that's saving lives yet" (19). She preemptively answers the question more thoroughly,

[15] It is clear Rankine is at least passingly familiar with the controversial hip-hop artist. In an article for *The New York Times* on tennis player Serena Williams, Rankine writes, "Black excellence is not supposed to be emotional as it pulls itself together to win after questionable calls. And in winning, it's not supposed to swagger, to leap and pump its fist, to state boldly, in the words of Kanye West, 'That's what it is, black excellence, baby.'"

however, in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*.[16] Meditating on the election of George W. Bush to the presidency of the United States in 2000 in the context of his comments on the grisly murder of James Byrd Jr. in 1998, the speaker of the poem considers the topic of optimism in an explicitly African American context.[17] This section begins, "Cornel West makes the point that hope is different from American optimism" (21). If the speaker appears confident in West's assertion, here, this confidence is undermined at least for the reader as the section continues. The speaker conveys her own "deepening personality flaw," a condition she describes as "IMH, The Inability to Maintain Hope" (23). The speaker—someone who has borne witness to white America's indifference to black suffering, someone who has come to realize "that billions of lives never mattered"—has "no innate trust in the supreme laws that govern us" (23). What are referred to here as "the supreme laws that govern us" are reminiscent more of optimism than they are of hope, and the optimism this line describes particularly brings to mind Leibniz's thoughts on the subject, a point made more concrete in the endnotes of the collection, in which Rankine uses *Webster's New World College Dictionary* to define optimism as "The doctrine held by Leibniz and others that the existing world is the best possible" (136). Instead, the speaker finds she is

[16] We should also note the language of Rankine's response to Leszkiewicz. When asked about hope, Rankine is seduced into defending herself with optimism. She corrects what may come across as pessimism by reassuring her interviewer that "I do think we are making progress." This line of argument has more in common with optimism than hope. To hope things will get better is merely to desire that they will get better, without having anything to say about the certainty of this coming about. The certainty of progress, often bolstered by appealing to the contemporary moment's place within the trajectory of history (i.e. "we are making progress"), is a more optimistic stance and thus in the same family as positive thinking.

[17] From the "Notes" section of the *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*:

> On June 7, 1998, 3 men: John King, Lawrence Brewer, and Shawn Berry, offered James Byrd Jr. a ride home in Berry's pickup truck. Byrd was walking along a road in Jasper, a rural town in East Texas. He was returning home from his niece's bridal shower. Instead of bringing him home, the men brought him to a clearing in the woods where they beat him and chained him to the back of the truck. They then sped along a road just east of the town. Byrd's shredded torso was found first, and then his head, neck, and right arm were found about a mile away. Police said a trail of blood, body parts, and personal effects stretched for 2 miles. (136)

"[t]oo scarred by hope to hope, too experienced to experience, too close to dead is what I think" (23).

There is a fundamental issue at the heart of the discourse on hope and nihilism not only in African American studies but in American thought more generally. Speaking against despair, American thinkers tend to lay out the history of American progress—whether it be economic or social—not only as an indicator for the *possibility* of further advancement but also as an *assurance* of such. Hope *should* communicate the desire for a better future without optimism's guarantee: hope is the *can* to optimism's *will*. But the fact is that most discourse reputedly peddling hope is often peddling positive thinking. In other words, self-proclaimed hopeful critics try to replace cynicism or pessimism on the Left not with the ambiguous teleology of hope but rather with positive thinking's promise of history's unerring arrow. As Winters writes in his extensive study of the discourse of hope in African American thought, those on the side of hope tend to confuse optimism for hope, "a process that cultivates expectations of a better future by marginalizing or downplaying dissonant memories and attachments" (6).[18] Winters is critical of the belief "that we have to believe in progress because this belief gives us hope that we can make more progress in the future" (5).[19] The prime example of this kind of thinking, Winters argues, is Richard Rorty and his pragmatist forefathers. With language that bolsters the idea of American exceptionalism, Rorty argues in *Achieving Our Country* (1998) that a certain amount of national pride is necessary to move society forward. This pride is grounded for Rorty in the history of American progress over the last two centuries, a history Rorty recounts with tellingly selective

[18] Winters, following West, uses the term *optimism* in his discussion, but as I have shown, optimism in the United States is often expressed in the language of positive thinking, and as such *positive thinking* is the term I would use to describe the quality of self-proclaimed hopeful discourse.

[19] Winters identifies this belief in progress especially with President Obama, who not only campaigned on hope but also appealed in several landmark speeches to the history of American progress in a manner that betrays the president's optimistic bias.

memory.[20] For Rankine, hope that thinkers like Rorty imagine always requires such a selective memory, because taking stock of the history of suffering necessarily challenges attempts to think of progress as an always present and always immanent horizon.[21] While it might be useful to bring out the differences between hope and positive thinking, so as to criticize one without doing so to the other, it is clear from most appeals to hope in contemporary American politics that there exists very little real difference between these two categories. American discourse is so saturated by positive thinking that all positive affect and thought is tinged by it.

Citizen stands not only as a collection of poetry and poetic essays but as a kind of historical text bearing witness to a time and place in American culture. The text relentlessly remembers and mourns and resists the urge to accept and forgive. It is a historical text comprising both easily identifiable historical events—such as the shootings of multiple unarmed black men and the treatment by media and the American government of the survivors of Hurricane Katrina—and everyday slights and mistreatments that slip through the cracks of the historical record. As a text that remembers, it is in fact a living text, one that has seen in its subsequent editions the additions of other names to the list of those killed unjustly (Jones 42-3). Jones writes that Rankine includes anecdotal (or possibly fictional) instances of casual mistreatment alongside events of "state-sanctioned violence" against black Americans in order to illustrate "the ways that black life is punctuated by less visible forms of injury such as fatigue, exhaustion, silencing, etc. from day to day as well as more visible incidents of spectacular violence and ultimately, death" (43). It would be easy to look at microaggressions and distance them from more overtly racist behavior such as outright murder, but then one behavior is

[20] For more on the contradictions of Rorty's thought in a specifically African American historical context, see Winters, pp. 207-213.
[21] The conflict between "always present" and "always immanent" here is purposeful, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis in relation to positive thinking's own conflicted temporality and the *moment of happiness*.

continuous with the other. A culture ambivalent toward the humanity of black people—ignorant of their individuality, of their susceptibility to violence and illness—is of course capable of treating them inhumanely. The black body, when treated only as such—as object—is made invisible to natural human compassion and empathy. In *Citizen,* the black body is made visible and mournable in a manner that defies not only the extreme right's desire to overlook black Americans as people but also the more centrist desire to overlook black Americans as racialized and objectified people. For the speaker in *Citizen,* American citizenship feels like it requires one to be optimistic, to let go of the past so as to imagine an achievable bright future: "Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on" (151). In this simple line near the end of the collection, the two clichés of positive thinking that animate the whole text converge. Rankine vocalizes here what many of the writers in this thesis try to express in their descriptions of positive thinkers. To combat the impulse to bend to America's pressure to stay positive, American writers—and African American writers in particular—have tried to grapple with the reality of suffering both historically and presently. While most of these writers have tried to showcase this suffering so as to point toward the contradictions of the American predicament, others have attempted to imagine an escape from this predicament either through the theorization of a potentially *negative* form of thinking or by replacing positive thinking aesthetically with formal negation. These are trends I will explore in the final chapter of my thesis. In the next chapter, I will pivot away from the body and its confining materiality and look at the way that contemporary fiction imagines positive thinking's idealistic conception of the mind.

Chapter 3

Matter over Mind: Reductionism, Positive Thinking, and "Materialism in Two Senses" in Franzen, Saunders, and Powers

Marco Roth, in his groundbreaking essay "The Rise of the Neuronovel" (2009), identifies in contemporary literature a distinct subgenre in which "the mind becomes the brain." In this genre, the neuronovel, novelists represent narratively the consciousnesses of sufferers of obscure neurological diseases, diseases that have been identified and thoroughly classified within the field of neuroscience. In representing diseases from Capgras syndrome to Tourette's syndrome, Roth argues that novelists have accepted neuroscience's material claims about neurological diseases without feeling the need to intervene on the level of causation or agency, two areas over which the humanities and sciences have waged war for the last 30 to 40 years. For Roth, this ceding of ground to science is curious, as the great materialist claims of neuroscience have not exactly been met with evidentiary research. Traditionally, materialist scientific philosophers have posited that, though science has not definitively proven the material basis of consciousness, it is on its way to such proof. In their acceptance of this near-dogmatic prediction, neuronovels, Roth writes, symbolize "the experience of a cognitive defeat. We imagine that science might get there, but it hasn't yet."

One impetus for this concession might be the neuroscientific turn in mainstream American scientific discourse at the end of the millennium. The 1990s were famously designated by then-President George H. W. Bush as the "Decade of the Brain" ("Presidential Proclamation 6158"). In that decade, some of the most important books on neuroscience were written by noted popular intellectuals in the field of scientific philosophy: Daniel Dennett, V. S. Ramachandran,

Steven Pinker, and others all wrote what remain their iconic texts in the field of popular neuroscience. Roth's contention is that all this research culminated in a "cultural […] shift away from environmental and relational theories of personality back to the study of brains themselves, as the source of who we are." The problem, then, is one of reductionism; rather than take in the entire network of causes for individual behavior and mood, the triumph of neuroscience at the turn of the 21st century has made it necessary only to study a brain's chemistry. Roth is not particularly celebratory of this new genre of fiction. Instead, he identifies it with a cultural consensus that surrounds scientific discourse. He laments that "novelists have ceded their ground to science." While science has always, to an extent, involved a kind of objectification of the individual, fiction has rarely taken science's lead, a trend bucked by this new genre. The novel has traditionally concerned itself with finding meaning in human existence, a meaning that Roth argues neuronovels explicitly abrogate in their implicit acceptance of neuroscientific discourse. "The etiology of a neurological condition is biological, not moral," he writes. "And mere biological contingency has a way of repelling meaning." In the generic form of the neuronovel, certain novelists have abandoned the literary pursuit of meaning in favor of a narrativization of neurological research.

The problem of reductionism is fertile ground not only for literature; there is also a strain of anti-reductionism in the social sciences. Jeremy A. Greene and Joseph Loscalzo write in their essay, "Putting the Patient Back Together," that "personalized medicine still tends to reduce the patient to a collection of precise molecular sequences with detailed clinical phenotyping" (2493). They trace this kind of reductionism back to the work of 17th-century physician Thomas Sydenham, who argued that treatment required "that all diseases be reduced to definite and certain species […] with the same care which we see exhibited by botanists in their phytologies"

(Sydenham, quoted in Greene and Loscalzo 2494). This approach has survived into the present day through what Greene and Loscalzo refer to as the "receptor theory in pharmacology and immunology" and the attendant "hope that every disease might contain a single specific target for powerful, selective, tailored chemotherapeutics" (2494). Hilary Rose and Steven Rose describe the endeavor of reductionism as "one of disaggregation—breaking down nature into ever smaller parts, explaining higher level phenomena, such as development or behavior, in terms of lower level sciences such as biochemistry" (52). For them, reductionism necessarily "los[es] sight of the organism itself" (52). Through reductionist materialism, the hard stuff of human emotion and consciousness is packaged within a simplified framework, whereby individual outcomes are determined according to a proper alignment of one's chemical inheritance with a complementary regime of chemical-altering designer drugs.[1]

Positive thinking is not necessarily innate to reductionist materialism and the weight such materialism puts on either dispositional inheritance or biochemical determinism. These do, however, *complement* neoliberal positive thinking, specifically in the latter's depoliticization of unequal outcomes. Under positive thinking, outcomes are decidedly individualized according to the effort one puts into one's own outlook. Once the individual has assumed all responsibility for his fate, that fate leaves the purview of political consideration. This is part of the reason why positive thinking has entered so seamlessly into neoliberal corporate rhetoric. As with neoliberal

[1] The brief overview of anti-reductionist discourse offered here does not cover the scope of criticism recently levied at reductionist science. Ana M. Soto and Carlos Sonnenschein provide a brief history of reductionism in their 2018 article on the subject, as well as an argument against reductionism that highlights philosophy as the underpinning problem. In their view, the reductionist commitment to physicalism—the ontological view that everything is determined and governed by the laws of physics—is primarily to blame, an issue they solve by substituting organicism, a philosophical position that "considers both bottom-up and top-down causation" (496). Andrew Miles offers a refutation of reductionism similar to Greene and Loscalzo's, arguing that biomedical reductionism has paved the way for alternative medicine and evidence-based medicine (EBM) to gain mainstream traction as more integrated approaches to healthcare. For Miles, the proliferation of such alternatives signals "a battle for the heart and soul of medicine itself between two increasingly separate philosophies whose future is surely not to exist as polar opposites" (942).

responsibilization, biological determinism narrows causation down to the individual level. One's genes and/or chemicals are responsible for one's lot, and larger political considerations can be dispensed with. By limiting our thoughts and perceptions, our emotional phenomena, and our internal worlds to the operations of purely physical processes, reductionism forecloses on other explanatory methods for why we are how we are. Most important among such explanatory methods is the environment, those operations outside of us that have an important role in shaping us. By dismissing the role of socio-political concerns especially, reductionism implicitly shuts down any suggestion that it is necessary to change the political world we inhabit. It takes the world as it is, a philosophical shrug of indifference toward socio-political forces. If the world is not exactly the best of all possible worlds, it is at least one which requires no direct intervention. Why change the world when it's so much easier to change your mood? The flip side of positive thinking's insistence upon individual efforts to see the world in the most optimistic light is the suggestion that the world is now as it always will be, that nothing will change on the worldly level, and all we can do for our mental health is adjust both our perspectives and our expectations. I will refer to this form of positive thinking—acquiescence to the status quo—as *positive realism* to differentiate it from the cognitive realignment of one's emotional disposition without discounting the manner in which the byproduct of positive thinking is always necessarily an acceptance of the given reality. In Roth's view, this is exactly the stance taken by contemporary novelists toward the supposed triumph of neuroscience: an acquiescence to what presents itself as an insurmountable claim to truth.

Roth's attitude of lament has not been ubiquitously accepted within contemporary literary studies. Many critics, in fact, have eagerly embraced the influence of modern scientific discourse

on literary texts, as this influence is seen to represent a bridging of C. P. Snow's "two cultures."[2] Stephen J. Burn, for instance, suggests in "Neuroscience and Modern Fiction" that "the ascent of the neurosciences—with its resurrection of concepts such as universality" can be thought of as "an antidote to postmodern and multicultural pluralism" (222). Yet a problem with this notion is that the universality promised by neuroscience is threatening to the way people think about identity. If identity is simply the composition of material processes in the brain, neuroscience ultimately downgrades the categories of class, gender, race, and culture as causal factors. What happens if it is just as easy to manipulate a poor man's brain or genes into being happy as it is a rich man's? Does a culture that already places a premium on happiness as the ultimate human endeavor reconfigure its values to address inequality, or does it merely accept that anybody can be happy and neglect such efforts? From the neuroscientific perspective, these complaints ring false: the limitation of causation for mental phenomena to chemical processes in the brain is the utopian ideal of brain studies. For some contemporary American fiction writers, however, neuroscience may cause as many problems as it solves.

Both Burn and Roth neglect in their analyses those works of fiction that have not merely accepted the latest scientific research but have instead directly challenged that discourse. Roth curtails considerably the scope of the neuronovel's definition by presenting as examples of the type merely those novels that feature characters who are not neurotypical.[3] The works of fiction

[2] The idea of the "two cultures" was coined by British novelist and scientist C. P. Snow in a 1959 lecture published as *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. According to his understanding of the relationship between the sciences and the humanities, each is mutually ignorant of the domain of the other. Literary critic F. R. Leavis, in his long essay *Two Cultures?: The Significance of C. P. Snow* (1962), famously disputes Snow's perceived preference for the scientific disposition over the literary sensibility. For a comprehensive overview of the history of the two cultures debate and its status in the 21st century, see Guy Ortolano's *The Two Cultures Controversy* (2009).

[3] Roth uses as his examples of the neuronovel Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997) and *Saturday* (2005), Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1997), Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* (2006), Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances* (2008), and John Wray's *Lowboy* (2008). All these novels feature characters who are not neurotypical in one way or another.

discussed in this chapter are all "neurofictions" to the extent that they represent the internalization of modern neuroscientific discourse in the mind of the contemporary individual. But these works of fiction all in some manner work to counteract any kind of cultural consensus about scientific discourse.[4] Jonathan Franzen, George Saunders, and Richard Powers have all commented in their fiction on the reductionist impulse in the life sciences. These writers respond particularly to a strand of thought within contemporary scientific discourse that Rose and Rose refer to as "the current fusion of biomedical reductionism and techno-optimism" (11). Techno-optimism is, according to Franzen, Saunders, and Powers, a hopelessly hopeful pursuit, akin to generic positive thinking in both its unmeasured optimism about the possibilities for human potential as well as its more aesthetic desire for the purely positive. The contemporary American literary response to scientific reductionism is one particularly concerned about the manner in which certain discourses and narratives come to make general claims about truth and power. All three writers deploy fiction as a narrative medium that upends simplistic discourses, but they do so in very different ways.

Although I would not classify the entirety of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) as a neuronovel, those portions of the novel featuring Gary, the oldest son of the central Lambert family, explicitly parrot neuroscientific discourse toward the aim of launching a critique of the manner in which materialist conceptions of mental phenomena oversimplify personal narratives. Indeed, what Roth laments about the neuronovels he identifies seems to be exactly what Franzen targets in his novel, from the reductionist form of materialist scientific philosophy to the intellectual consensus toward scientific research. Franzen argues in his widely read 1996

[4] It is important to note here that the authors I discuss in this chapter are not critical of *all* science. It would be mistaken to argue that science in general is accepting of the sociopolitical status quo. Climate science, to cite one prominent instance, stands as a contradiction to any such claim.

Harper's essay that we live in a "therapeutic society," a "binary culture" in which "you're either healthy or you're sick, you either function or you don't" (44). In such a culture, every disease has a distinct cause and a distinct cure, and it has largely been the job of science to assign these, because, Franzen writes, "anything is better than mystery" (44). What Roth refers to as "the new reductionism of mind to brain" is characterized by the explanation of "proximate causes of mental function in terms of neurochemistry, and ultimate causes in terms of evolution and heredity." Gary offers a quintessential example of the kind of critique that Roth hopes for within contemporary literature: with his nearly pathological neurochemical portfolio, Franzen uses Gary to critique neuroscience's ideal subject (who also happens to be neoliberalism's ideal subject). Franzen takes aim at the role reductionist neuroscience plays in obscuring our understanding of the ultimate causes of our behaviors or feelings in favor of proximate causes such as certain synapses or neurons in our brains firing rather than others. Gary believes that his firm understanding of the material causes or correlates of his subjective experience entails control of that subjective experience itself. He believes that knowing what depression looks like on an EEG or an fMRI means understanding and having control over the subjective phenomenon of depression. This proves to be a faulty belief at best. In *The Corrections,* Franzen also tries to establish a comparison between the materialist science that he is critiquing and the other popular meaning of the term *materialism* that refers to a lust for material wealth and possessions. For Franzen, the promise of material wealth is intimately linked with the adoption of the materialist ontological approach to scientific study. While Franzen is relatively scathing in his attack on neuroscientific reductionism, the narratological replacement he offers, I will argue, leans heavily on a kind of reductionism innate to the literary tradition of psychological realism. My criticism

of Franzen's narrative solutions will extend Rachel Greenwald Smith's arguments about the author's neoliberal sympathies as they appear in *The Corrections*.

Following the discussion of Franzen, which will identify some contradictions in his attempt to skewer scientific and consumerist materialism, I will move to an already familiar figure in this dissertation, George Saunders, and specifically his short story "Escape from Spiderhead" (2010). In this story, Saunders describes a hypothetical world in which the dictums of reductionist materialist science—specifically neuroscience and psychopharmacology—have been accepted and employed by the dominant powers in society. In Saunders's fictional world, the problem is not the factuality of materialist premises but rather the state of freedom and compassion in a post-dualist world: that is, a world in which the dualist opposition between mind and body has been resolved and deemed absurd, a world in which mind is matter. "Escape from Spiderhead" confronts both the scientific consensus of materialism and the economic consensus of neoliberalism. Saunders identifies in both discourses the implication that there is no alternative, that the dominant discourse is one that has become uninfringeable. He counters this worldview, however, with a suggestion that alternatives are indeed available, even if they are ultimately fatal. If Saunders is more consistent in his criticism of materialism than Franzen, he essentially argues his case in terms rather familiar to the humanities in the two cultures debate. Saunders offers in materialism's stead a literary mind-body dualism.

Franzen and Saunders state their cases against reductionism from illuminating but nevertheless limited viewpoints, so in the last part of the chapter I will turn to a writer who approaches a critique of modern materialist discourses with more nuance and complexity. While the previous two writers contest materialism's claims from distinctly literary positions, Richard Powers stands as an example of a contemporary writer committed to debating scientific claims

on science's own grounds. What Powers does better than virtually any other contemporary American fiction writer is register a skepticism of certain scientific discourses or domains without dispensing altogether with science as a meaningful intellectual field. For Powers, any anti-scientific rhetoric is immediately also anti-intellectual. What he enacts in *Generosity* (2009), as in a number of his other novels, is a conversation between the two cultures that was theorized by C.P. Snow to be all but impossible. Powers challenges a number of reductionist materialist sciences in *Generosity*, but his primary target is behavioral genetics, a scientific discipline that carries with it a theoretical preference for nature over nurture as a determining factor for human behavior. Powers goes further than Franzen in his critique, taking aim at psychological realist fiction and the way it tends, like reductionist materialism, to underdetermine causation and oversimplify matters of cause and effect. And unlike Saunders, Powers does not try to argue against materialism as an explanatory method but rather points out contradictions in the claims made by reductionist scientific discourse.

In all these texts, counter to Roth's argument, scientific reductionism is being strongly challenged rather than merely accepted. Further, these authors associate the materialist argument not only with a larger cultural turn toward reductive theories of subjectivity but with an analogous cultural turn toward acquiescence to the world as it is. If this acquiescence appears as a kind of pessimistic resignation, these authors bring out its kinship with positive thinking, specifically the manner in which positive thinking tends to dispense with causational considerations outside the power of the individual. In my analysis, I will be connecting positive thinking with a similar attitude of acquiescence that Mark Fisher refers to as "capitalist realism." The texts in this chapter all connect the neuroscientific turn with a financialization of the scientific sphere. When I write that there has been in the last quarter-century a cultural

acceptance of the status quo, I specifically qualify this "status quo" as the neoliberal configuration of capitalism, a configuration that Fisher argues has not been met with any meaningful pushback at the level of mainstream political thought. The relationship between reductionist materialism and neoliberal capitalism, however, is more complex than a mere submission by the former to the rules of the latter, as I will illustrate via the texts to follow.

Our Brains, Our Selves: Neuroscience and the Reified Mind in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*

Several early reviews of *The Corrections* note the manner in which consumerist materialism, the obsession with material wealth and things, is challenged and criticized in the novel. Few, however, picked up on the other materialism that haunts the novel, the philosophical view that everything is made of the same basic stuff.[5] Yet in an interview with Donald Antrim about *The Corrections*, Franzen raises what he sees as an American confrontation between literary values and "materialism in two senses." After discussing the role that consumerist materialism plays in taking potential readers' attention away from the printed word and toward more technological forms of entertainment, Franzen says:

> And then, even more to the point, there's a vulgar intellectual materialism that is encapsulated, for instance, in the currency of the term "clinical depression." If I say, "At that time in my life I was clinically depressed," in a way this ends the conversation. It

[5] Plenty of reviewers note the novel's interest in consumerism and economic materialism, often missing the equally important element of scientific materialism to Franzen's narrative. In a mixed review for *The Guardian*, Blake Morrison notes the novel's "critique of materialism," by which he means consumerization (Morrison). David Gates uses the word "consumerism" in his review to describe the novel's object of scrutiny (Gates). Jon McGregor is a rare exception to this oversight, observing how *The Corrections* deals with "some hefty contemporary themes, from biotechnology and the consumerisation of mental health to gender politics, corporate malpractice and the dissatisfactions of materialism" (31).

> replaces a potentially interesting story with a very simple, material story. "I was clinically depressed. The chemicals in my brain were bad. And I took this material thing into my body, and then the chemicals in my brain were better, and I was better." Obviously I'm not trying to minimize the seriousness of actual profound depression. But what we gain as science learns how to correlate the organic with the psychological, we lose in terms of the larger conversation. The poetic, the subjective, and particularly the *narrative* account of what a person is and what a life means—I feel like the novelist's vision is engaged in a turf war with the scientific, biological, medical account. (Antrim)

For Franzen, the problem of materialism is a problem of narrative. He suggests here that it is not the *truth* of scientific materialism that is the problem but rather the consequences this truth has for the manner in which an individual comes to understand the world he or she inhabits. Reductionist materialism offers a narrative far too simplistic in both its classification of a conflict and its recommendations for amelioration. For Franzen, the *limitation* of certain materialist assumptions concerning reality functions therapeutically to allow individuals a simple identification of the ultimate causes of their problems. This simplification of mental phenomena allows for a similar simplification of the means of treating those phenomena. This therapeutic relationship, I argue, is part of the content of reductionist materialism's inherent positive thinking. Proper scientific knowledge is not only (as in Gary's case below) a tool for optimization but also a means of understanding and pushing the boundaries of that optimization, a means of increasing one's bio-capital. In reductionist terms, this optimization is achieved explicitly in accordance with the actual, or *that which is*. Reductionist methodologies also fundamentally point toward ontologies of self-dependence and environmental independence, a

potential explanation for why techno-optimistic sciences have been received rather favorably within the corporate structures of neoliberal capitalism.

In *The Corrections*, Franzen attempts to establish a causal relationship between materialist consumerism and neoliberal subjectivity on the one hand and materialist conceptions of the mind and psychopharmacological correctives on the other. This is a particularly Foucauldian critique whereby the economic and the political are understood to set the parameters on self-conceptions, those parameters being necessary in the process of monetizing the individual through the self-conceptions already firmly established by the sociopolitical status quo. In the especially telling words of an attendee at the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos, "We created our own problem that we are now trying to solve" (quoted in Davies, 8).[6] Though the language of this admission is more or less ambivalent about the actual magnitude of capitalism's responsibility for stress disorders—and could even be taken as self-congratulating in capitalism's benevolent self-correcting spirit—Franzen seems in *The Corrections* to be making much more conspiratorial claims about the role of capitalism in the hegemony of materialist explanations of lived experience.

Gary is presented in *The Corrections* as a character who brings together neoliberal positive thinking with a reductionist materialist relationship to his emotional phenomena. He is intimately in touch with his moment-to-moment emotional experience, always searching to

[6] Davies uses this statement to argue his case that post-industrial capitalist workplace stress has generated mental illnesses that are then targeted by wealth-motivated psy disciplines, which try to localize that stress within the individual's responsibility. This effort retools the individual to adjust his coping mechanisms such that he can reenter the stressful workplace equipped with the latest technologies and strategies (8-10). This argument is persuasive, but I am using the quote specifically as an illustration of the way in which Franzen imagines materialist constructions of normal and abnormal minds as hegemonic explanatory methods. These methods, as I understand Franzen to suggest, do not merely originate as a lucrative corrective to the unfortunate side effects of post-industrial work, a situation in which pharmacological science benignantly cleans up the messes that capitalism leaves behind. Rather, it seems Franzen sees these explanatory methods as a preemptive framing of what constitutes legitimate classifications of mental illnesses toward the purpose of keeping the amelioration of those illnesses proverbially "in-house." The methods are themselves capitalist endeavors.

optimize his positive emotions so as to prevent the onset—or, more accurately, awareness—of negative emotions and depression. The way he tracks these emotions, however, differs from traditional positive thinking in that he catalogues not emotions as such but rather processes in his brain that, for him, represent those emotions. The fundamental assumption at the heart of Gary's ontology is that an understanding (howsoever cursory and superficial it may be) of the material correlates of an emotional experience equates to an understanding of the emotions themselves. The material correlates become, in fact, surrogates for the identification of the emotions: that is, the chemical processes in his brain come to replace rather than signify his emotional experience. A materialist grasp on his mental states equates for Gary to a kind of control. The narrator opens the passage on Gary's mind-tracking with the character's hesitant submission to the requirements of self-management:

> Although in general Gary applauded the modern trend toward individual self-management of retirement funds and long-distance calling plans and private-schooling options, he was less than thrilled to be given responsibility for his own personal brain chemistry, especially when certain people in his life, notably his father, refused to take such responsibility. But Gary was nothing if not conscientious […] He estimated that his levels of Neurofactor 3 (i.e., serotonin: a very, very important factor) were posting seven-day or even thirty-day highs, that his Factor 2 and Factor 7 levels were likewise outperforming expectations, and that his Factor 1 had rebounded from an early-morning slump related to the glass of Armagnac he'd drunk at bedtime. He had a spring in his step, an agreeable awareness of his above-average height and his late-summer suntan. His resentment of his wife, Caroline, was moderate and well contained. Declines led advances in key indices of paranoia (i.e., his persistent suspicion that Caroline and his

> two older sons were mocking him), and his seasonally adjusted assessment of life's futility and brevity was consistent with the overall robustness of his mental economy. He was not the least bit clinically depressed. (139-40)

Rachel Greenwald Smith astutely points out the manner in which Gary, in the reader's extensive introduction to his character about a quarter of the way into the novel, "maps his mental health as if he were tracking stocks" (6). This leads her to a reading of Gary as a sort of prototypical neoliberal self-optimizer. What is so important about this passage and the language therein, however, is not only that Gary is closely tracking "his mental health" but that he is doing so in a very specific vernacular. As can be observed in the passage, the mastery of modern neuroscience is, for Franzen at least, a major component of achieving neoliberal self-optimization. In this passage, then, the otherwise separate dimensions of governance and scientific literacy are intimately connected, an argument Nikolas Rose makes in *The Politics of Life Itself*. In a chapter on "neurochemical selves," Rose writes, "Individuals themselves […] are beginning to recode variations in moods, emotions, desires, and thoughts in terms of the functioning of their brain chemicals, and to act upon themselves in the light of this belief" (223). The connection to be made here between his catalogue of neurochemically defined affects and positive thinking is the manner in which Gary's cataloguing is directly related to his desire to stave off not only accusations of depression by his family but his own admission that he is depressed. His material profile is a direct effort to focus on the "positive" chemical processes in his brain as a means of avoiding an awareness of a negative reality, a point stressed by the final line of the passage, which supposedly acts as a summation of the previous information but rather appears upon reading as an interruption or false conclusion. Rose opens his chapter on neurochemical selves with an argument that self-government is more or less a timeless art, determined historically by

dominant "knowledges and beliefs about the kinds of creatures that they [humans] are" (187). While it might seem that scientific advancement would undermine decidedly unscientific approaches such as positive thinking, the passage above illustrates how the two have come together. Rather than stand as an alternative to positive thinking, Gary's neuro-tracking fuses the otherwise philosophically separate discourses of positive thinking and neurochemistry, creating a hybrid discourse that might be described as a scientifically literate positive thinking.

Franzen more directly connects materialist science with economic concerns and a taste of positive thinking in his staging of the scene in which the Axon Corporation pitches its latest drug, Corecktall, a kind of wonder-drug that promises to do exactly what its name implies. The drug's founder, Earl Eberle, describes the process of the drug as one "that is *instantaneously self-correcting*" (193, emphasis in the original), a nod to neoliberal governmentality's emphasis on the individual's need to be self-vigilant such that he may correct away behaviors or moods harmful to his human capital. It recalls Gary's own self-correction as an identifiable example of the quintessential neoliberal subject, a point made more explicit by Gary's enthusiastic acceptance of the promises of Axon's drug in direct contrast to his sister Denise's skepticism. For Franzen, both the fact of the drug itself and the logic of self-correction within which it operates ally Corecktall and the model of neoliberal subjectivity that it represents with the tradition of American optimism, or more specifically positive thinking. When the pitchman is listing the skills that Corecktall particularly enhances, he singles out, "Thinking positively!" (193). The presentation is organized around a numbered list of quick, memorable phrases, one of which is "***RELAX—IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD!***" (196). The notion that the individual's woes are "all in your head" is a play on the general line of thought within positive thinking – originating in Quimby's New Thought – that a negative outlook is merely the individual's

perspective and can easily be replaced with a positive outlook through the process of thought correction. The Axon Corporation gives this old saying a twist, arguing that it is no longer the mind that needs to be changed but rather the brain. The implication of Corecktall is that the individual's woes are merely chemical and electrical processes in the brain, and modern neuroscience—channeled through materialist psychopharmacology—has made these woes instantly correctable without the least bit of individual effort. The logic of the drug takes the basic premise of positive thinking that an individual's emotional phenomena are strictly individual rather than environmental and makes the cure much easier than perpetual mental effort. This aligns reductionism with a form of idealism inherent to positive thinking. Reducing causes down to singular factors treats complicated emotional and mental processes as entirely isolated phenomena, divorced from ultimate cause in favor of correlative states.

The presentation pitches the drug not only as a reinforcement of both positive thinking and reductionist materialism but also as a tool for the further accumulation of wealth by those already wealthy enough to attend an investors' meeting. A following phrase reads, "***THE RICH GET RICHER!***" (196). This latter declaration is in line with David Harvey's identification of the neoliberal turn in political governance as a move by the capitalist class to secure its class distinction, a theory evidenced by the growing rate of economic inequality in neoliberal nations (9-38). Within the specific context of Franzen's novel, this assertion comes in relation to a drug that promises to ameliorate nearly all physical and mental defects, and the assertion's appearance here points toward a larger critique of the role of money and power within scientific developments. Because the investors' meeting is attended almost entirely by already rich people, the phrase suggests that the drug will act as a further bolsterer of class power. After the pitchman

explains the phrase, Franzen writes, “From all over Ballroom B came laughter and applause and whoops of appreciation” (196).

Despite its acute satire, nevertheless, there is a contradiction at the heart of Franzen’s mimesis of materialist orthodoxy, paralleling the contradiction Smith notes in her analysis of the novel’s treatment of neoliberal orthodoxy. For Smith, the novel ultimately reinforces the neoliberal ideology of self-correcting markets and perpetual economic gain. *The Corrections* closes with a historical moment—the bursting of the dot-com bubble—that is mirrored in each of the novel’s characters facing their developmental low-points and ultimately self-correcting, the novel ending on a relatively optimistic note. The problem with this, for Smith, is the use of an ideological rhetoric of “correction” to designate not only the characters’ individualist self-projects but also the behavior of a market after a crash, as if low-points are merely bumps along the road rather than symptomatic of the empirical failures of so-called free markets (6-11). For the reader, and perhaps even for Franzen, there is an ambiguity in the satire. James Wood vents a similar frustration to Smith’s in his review of the novel for *The New Republic*. Acknowledging the ironic reasoning behind Franzen’s mimicry of neuroscientific discourse, Wood argues that Franzen merely “re-represent[s]” that discourse, “in a way that looks a little close to complicity with it” (“Abhorring a Vacuum” 38). Though the reader is likely convinced of Gary’s neurochemical tracking throughout the novel, it is all problematically prefaced by the narrator with the caveat that his mental state is healthy “to the extent that Gary was able to understand and track his neurochemistry (and he was a vice president at CenTrust Bank, not a shrink, let’s remember)” (139). The question then immediately arises: Is Gary’s understanding of neurochemistry flawed? Or is neurochemical discourse flawed from the start? Without this line, the novel seems to express a distrust of neurochemical narrative, but the inclusion of this line—

especially as a preface to the satire of Gary's neuro-tracking—muddies the waters. It would seem instead that the problem is neurochemical definitions in the hands of an amateur, a layperson who knows very little about the subject. The novel communicates here a kind of complicity, then, with neuroscientific reductionism similar to the kind of neoliberal complicity Smith identifies in the novel's closing pages.

Other critics have noted this complicity but have represented it as a glorification of this sort of scientific discourse. For Burn, the novel actually lionizes some of the theories within neuroscientific research rather than simply dismiss the field altogether. Burn shrewdly identifies the various allusions within *The Corrections* to mainstream contemporary findings and debates within neuroscience. He imagines the structure of the novel as an illustration of Daniel Dennett's multiple-draft model of consciousness. Burn does get some things wrong, however. Identifying Gary's "reductionist conception of consciousness" wherein "chemicals in the brain mold mood and behavior," Burn argues that this derives specifically from Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (1997), a book that, according to Burn, Franzen was reading around the time he was doing most of the final work on *The Corrections* (Burn 117, 115). Pinker writes in his book that the mind is "a machine, nothing but the on-board computer of a robot made of tissue" (92). Indeed Gary does seem to see his mind as a machine, one to which he needs to pay special attention to keep well-oiled. Burn neglects, however, the manner in which Franzen's lampooning of Gary's reductionist materialism is a critique of Pinker's computational account of consciousness as well. Burn also fails to mention the other popular neuroscientific claims that Franzen implicitly dismisses in his treatment of Gary's ontology. Francis Crick, Nobel laureate and co-discoverer of the molecular structure of DNA, writes in *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (1994), his book on neurobiology and consciousness, that "'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and

your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules" (3). The chemico-reductionist impulse in popular neuroscientific discourse is not contained to Pinker alone; it is a pervasive problem in that field that Franzen seems eager to illuminate. As eager as he appears, however, Franzen disappoints in his critique of reductionist science.

Despite the critiques more explicit than implicit in the chapter on Gary, the novel's perspective is not in the end so easily classifiable, as Joseph Carroll would like to suggest it is, as "Foucauldian ideological critique" (89). It would be misleading to represent the satire of Gary's reductionist materialism as the novel's final word on the pharmacological model. In fact, the novel features a preemptive problematization of a Foucauldian reading of reductionist materialism in the character of Chip, the youngest Lambert son. Chip is a professor of theory at a small liberal arts college, teaching classic Marxist texts. He loses his job, however, when it is discovered that he has had a sexual relationship with one of his students. As tempting as it is to read Chip's deconstructions of capitalist forms of power within the realm of mental health as indictments that the novel is itself launching, the fact is that the novel lampoons these passages just as much as the passages on Gary's mental economy. Chip challenges the pharmacological model with such Foucauldian gems as "she's using the word 'health' like it has some kind of absolute timeless meaning," and "The very definition of mental 'health' is the ability to participate in the consumer economy" (31). This is all put into question, however, when Chip comes to the insight that all his intellectual naysaying might be for naught, that his critiques, while logically coherent, fail to account for empirical possibilities or realities:

> Criticizing a sick culture, even if the criticism accomplished nothing, had always felt like useful work. But if the supposed sickness wasn't a sickness at all—if the great Materialist

> Order of technology and consumer appetite and medical science really *was* improving the lives of the formerly oppressed; if it was only straight white males like Chip who had a problem with this order—then there was no longer even the most abstract utility to his criticism. (45)

This passage is at best ambiguous in its denunciation of all that Chip has said up until this point in the novel, and it certainly cannot account for the manner in which Gary's materialism overtly fails to give him an accurate reckoning with his psyche. Further, if this passage is supposed to signal a change of heart in Chip, some kind of recognition of a previously hidden truth, the truth on offer strikes one as ultimately suspect. It is not explained here, for example, *how* "the great Materialist Order of technology and consumer appetite and medical science really *was* improving the lives of the formerly oppressed." We are merely told that is the case. Chip's conclusion reads like positive thinking, giving the reader a positive spin on something the novel tells us elsewhere is problematic. Chip's denunciation of his Theory functions as the first step in his problematic character development. The novel's general movement begins with Chip's alienation from his father, whom he believes he must define himself against, and progresses slowly toward their reconciliation. Franzen's treatment of *realism* takes on a double register. Not only is it the literary mode through which he wishes to depict his narrative world; it is also an injunction to abandon political idealism. Chip is weighed down not only by the hypocrisy that his self-limiting Marxism imposes upon him; he ultimately sacrifices his political philosophy because it is unclear what "utility" it serves.

The novel's contradictions come to a head in the narrative arc of the Lambert patriarch, Alfred. Alfred is described in the novel as a kind of Weberian capitalist, a man who believes firmly in the Calvinist ideals of hard work and self-exertion. Against Alfred's liberal view of

individual autonomy, however, his Parkinson's substantiates the reality that the mind and the autonomy of the individual are ultimately subject to genetically inherited chemical abnormalities. As Jeremy Green writes, Alfred's Parkinson's disease and its attendant symptoms "represent the excruciatingly literal failure of the liberal conception of the subject" (110). Franzen does manage to stage Alfred's disease as a phenomenon more elusive than simple material processes, but he does so in a peculiar fashion. By the end of the novel, the reader finds that the acceleration of Alfred's illness is tied up with his discovery of Denise's sexual liaison with one of Alfred's coworkers at Midland Pacific. The revelation that Denise's sexual transgression kickstarted Alfred's mental deterioration confirms Franzen's view of a more interesting *novelistic* narrativity than materialist science's narrativity at the same time that it recapitulates tired patriarchal narratives of the effects of daughters' sexual exploits on the well-being of their fathers. Franzen follows through on his desire to see mental phenomena described in richer narrative detail than simple material description, but he does so with a strange willingness to embrace similarly simple novelistic narratives. Franzen's criticism of the contemporary neuronovel here amounts to a kind of regressive flight back to the psychological novel's oversimplification of cause and effect.

The novel becomes, then, not a work of fiction that resists the urge to diagnose a sick culture but rather one that seeks to demonstrate the impossibility of a social novel altogether. The social critique that arises in the novel—and there is a lot of it—is ultimately resolved by the structural move away from social critique and toward familial refuge. If neoliberal capitalism presents itself as a consistent problem in the novel—from the absorption of Alfred's lifelong company by a multinational, to the extreme monetization and marketization of the Corecktall wonder drug, to Chip's involvement in the privatization of an Eastern European country—the

solution Franzen offers is essentially a disinvolvement, an acceptance of the social context coded as a return to family. Even the critique of Gary's neural profile is ultimately preemptively hedged by the contextual information that Gary is "not a shrink" (139). Social critique seems entirely secondary to the more compelling story of a father's mental and physical degradation and the reconciliation between him and his youngest son. Ty Hawkins writes that Franzen's response to what he sees as the failing social novel is ultimately "a withdrawal from the prospect of social engagement" (77). The structural logic of *The Corrections* amounts, in a way, to a recapitulation of the claim that we are at "the end of history" and Thatcher's declaration that "there is no alternative" to capitalism.

Franzen at least gestures toward a critique of reductionist materialism, but he never quite follows through on the promises he establishes early on. One can sense in his treatment of the topic a desire to reinstate narrative conventions into individual stories, conventions that resist simplistic constructions, such as those offered by capitalism and psychopharmacology, and open up the space for ultimate causes both existential and cultural. Materialist accounts of human emotions, Franzen argues in the novel, ultimately reify those emotions, reduce them to mere things that can be accounted for directly and tampered with accordingly. This effort to make emotions—particularly undesirable ones—into things is of course the goal of the pharmacological model of the mind, and it is not necessarily so in any threatening or malign way. A generous study of the pharmacological model admits to the benign theoretical grounds upon which it is premised, namely the desire to ameliorate those emotions that stunt an individual's flourishing and to promote emotions that come to the individual with considerable difficulty. However, the consequence of a reification of human emotion is a simplification of both the emotional experience itself and the means of achieving certain emotions. In the

neoliberal model of subjectivity, this brings the elusive stuff of subjective experience into the purview of rational self-management. However, the formal alternative Franzen suggests by way of the generic mode of his novel is a type of realism that forecloses on anything beyond the actually existing world. It is an alternative with which both Saunders and Powers take issue and implicitly correct in their own treatments of the subject of materialist reductionism.

"The mandates of science": Anti-Reductionism and Spirituality in George Saunders's Materialist Prison

Originally published in *The New Yorker* in 2010 and collected in *Tenth of December* in 2013, George Saunders's short story "Escape from Spiderhead" tells the story of a man, Jeff, who undergoes a series of strange drug experiments while incarcerated for committing a murder as a teenager. Over the course of two days—the last of his life—Jeff makes love to two women while under the influence of a love drug. To confirm the effect of the drug and check for any "residual fondness," Jeff is made to decide which of the two women to inject with a drug that causes terminal depression (56). The story interrogates both the power of capitalist science over individuals and the concept of human subjectivity when made malleable to designer drugs. Driving the story is the relation of reductionism and capitalism to positive thinking. Unlike Franzen and Powers, Saunders consistently contradicts in his stories the most fundamental assumptions that underpin materialist ontologies. Saunders has spoken in several interviews against scientific and economic materialism, and in an interview with Kevin Spinale for *America,* Saunders directly lays out his opposition to scientific materialism on spiritualist grounds:

> I think we live in a time of just soul-crushing materialism. And by this I mean both that (1) we value material possessions way too much and (2) we believe way too much that the only true or real thing is what can be immediately seen and measured—that is, we live in profoundly anti-spiritual times, and operate under the unfortunate *de facto* assumption that we just happen to be built such that our mental abilities enable us to know *exactly everything* there is to know about the universe, just as we are, no strain or work or faith in the reality of things unseen. This is a fundamentally worldly and limited viewpoint: what we see is what there is, period. (Spinale)

Saunders makes an argument here similar to the one put forward by Franzen in his interview with Antrim. There is an accusation that materialism is "soul-crushing," that it represses something fundamental about *human* existence. Saunders also explicitly includes in his address the apparently separate discourses of scientific and economic materialism. He goes further than Franzen, however, in his proposed alternative to materialism. Whereas Franzen is in search of more creative narrative accounts, ones which go beyond merely literal descriptions of observable material, Saunders substitutes materialism as an ontology with something more like spiritualism. For Saunders, materialism suffers methodologically from its own brand of positive thinking, a problem resolved only with a more spiritual approach. In "Escape from Spiderhead," we see Saunders explicitly bring the ontologies of materialism and spiritualism into direct confrontation.

Similar to Franzen in *The Corrections,* Saunders establishes a connection between neoliberal science and acquiescence to the status quo. Everyone, it seems, accepts the world as it is as some sort of impenetrable machine, and this is mirrored in the story's treatment of reductionist materialism. The story begins:

> "Drip on?" Abnesti said over the P.A.

"What's in it?" I said.

"Hilarious," he said.

"Acknowledge," I said.

Abnesti used his remote. My MobiPak™ whirred. Soon the Interior Garden looked really nice. Everything seemed super-clear.

I said out loud, as I was supposed to, what I was feeling.

"Garden looks nice," I said. "Super-clear." (*ToD* 45)

Introduced in this opening passage are the two meanings of materialism – which we have already seen in *The Corrections* – as they manifest throughout Saunders's story. Firstly and most evidently, we witness a drug so strong that it overpowers Jeff's own perception of the Interior Garden: we are told, upon the administration of the drug, "Soon the Interior Garden looked really nice." This line serves as an immediate indicator of what the story has to say about reductionist materialism and its own form of positive thinking. The scientists, instead of changing the Interior Garden directly, specifically design a drug that adjusts Jeff's attitude toward and perception of it. Reductionist materialism accepts the world as it is: instead of changing the world, it is much easier to simply change the way we see it. This is a literalized version of Stoic philosopher Epictetus's aphorism, "Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things" (*The Enchiridion* 19). Norman Vincent Peale offers a similar formulation in his *The Power of Positive Thinking*: "Any fact facing us, however difficult, even seemingly hopeless, is not so important as our attitude towards that fact" (14). This form of moral relativism recalls Joe's mental gymnastics in DeWitt's *Lightning Rods*, where every moral transgression is calling out for a positive spin. Less evident in this passage, but more clearly central as the story progresses, is the role of materialism as it pertains to money and possessions.

In the passage, the reader is familiarized with the power dynamics of Jeff's relationship with Abnesti. Jeff's curiosity in the second line of the story is met with an authoritative dismissal, followed by his inevitable acquiescence. Furthermore, after Jeff does "acknowledge" his consent to the mystery drug's injection, the reader is told, "I said out loud, *as I was supposed to*, what I was feeling" (emphasis mine). Though it will not be immediately apparent until the end of this part of the story that Jeff is the subject of a drug experiment in which he is the human guinea pig, it is already clear who is in charge. In Adam Kelly's reading, this particular line serves as an early indicator of "the neoliberal corporate context of the story's setting" (46). For Kelly, the sentence attests to neoliberal governmentality's technique of convincing the individual to enlist in "the terms of his or her own subjugation, often through seemingly benign bureaucratic methods" (47), a line of argumentation he derives from Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics* and subsequent theorists of the Foucauldian persuasion. In this reading, Jeff's subjugation actually plays out like a choice, and the reader is continuously reminded of this throughout the story with Jeff's many acknowledgments. I would argue, however, that these choices are determined and curtailed by the power dynamic between Jeff and his scientific supervisors. Jeff's repetitive acknowledgements read like the unconscious response from an individual on the lowest rung of a hierarchical power structure, but this persistent capitulation is reversed when Jeff later remains silent instead of acknowledging his consent. This act of resistance figures as a turning point in the story, setting off a peculiar bureaucratic trap in which Abnesti and his lab partner, Verlaine, must acquire special approval from their own superiors to administer Jeff with a drug that will force his consent. At this point, the illusion of choice the story had initially offered is exposed. When Jeff attempts to choose something that contradicts the efforts of Abnesti and Verlaine, he is threatened with a chemically induced acquiescence.

The financial aspect to the story remains almost entirely vague. Foucauldian power dynamics inherent to neoliberalism are front and center, but the promise of financial gain as a premise for scientific study is never actually directly addressed throughout "Escape from Spiderhead." The word *money*, in fact, only appears once in the story, and it has nothing to do with the pharmacological side of Spiderhead's scientific pursuit.[7] The story does, however, gesture toward a relationship between scientific materialism and material gain in the characteristic trademark stamps attached to various in-story products, including the product that administers Jeff's drugs, the MobiPak™.[8] The various designer drugs that the Spiderhead has already put out on the market are also accompanied by trademark stamps. These include Vivistif™, whose function should be relatively apparent; Verbaluce™, which allows Jeff abnormal eloquence; and Darkenfloxx™, the depression-inducing drug. These trademark stamps throw into relief the stated objectivity of the experimenting scientists. Instead of pursuing science for widespread progress, it is clear that their efforts are directed toward profits for a private

[7] Late in the story, when Jeff first refuses to allow Abnesti to administer drugs into his system, Abnesti tries to win over Jeff by reminding him of the scientist's benevolence, pleading, "When a certain individual got athlete's foot on his groin on a Sunday, did a certain other individual drive over to Rexall and pick up the cream, paying for it with his own personal money?" (68)

[8] This is a staple in several of Saunders's stories. These include: another story in this collection, "My Chivalric Fiasco," in which the narrator is given KnightLyfe® to sound more authentically like a knight; "Jon," in *In Persuasion Nation*, with the mood- and productivity-enhancing drug Aurabon®; and in "I CAN SPEAK!™" in that same collection, whose eponymous product is an implant that speaks for infants according to what they are thinking.

company.[9] Science cannot be neutral when conducted at the behest of elite interests, which is increasingly the case today.[10]

Consistent throughout Jeff's various drug trials is the administration of the language-enhancing drug, Verbaluce™, which causes Jeff to describe his experiences in considerably elevated prose and with a writer's eye for abstraction and metaphor. Though his initial effusions are more or less comedic to the reader, the literary register takes on a much darker connotation when it is affected as Jeff observes Heather—one of the women with whom he makes love—commit a brutal suicide by way of simultaneously forcing "her head into the wall" and apparently self-harming "with one of the chair legs," an action Jeff describes in his Verbaluce™-induced state as being carried out "intently, almost beautifully" (70-71). This scene in particular substantiates Kelly's contention that Saunders critiques modernist literary aesthetics by aligning them with "modes of spectatorship" (42). I would contend that Saunders does not stop at literary language in his condemnation of various modes of spectatorship, however. Though Jeff looks on at Heather's suffering and offers a measly aestheticization of it, beside him is Abnesti, not only

[9] In his 1998 letter of resignation from the American Psychiatric Association, Loren Mosher famously penned a scathing criticism of that institution's reliance on—and transformation by—money from the pharmaceutical industry. He writes:

> The major reason for this action is my belief that I am actually resigning from the American Psychopharmacological Association. Luckily, the organization's true identity requires no change in the acronym […] At this point in history, in my view, psychiatry has been almost completely bought out by the drug companies. The APA could not continue without the pharmaceutical company support of meetings, symposia, workshops, journal advertising, grand rounds luncheons, unrestricted educational grants etc. etc. Psychiatrists have become the minions of drug company promotion […] No longer do we seek to understand whole persons in their social contexts—rather we are there to realign our patients' neurotransmitters. (Mosher)

[10] In his book *Science Mart* (2011) Philip Mirowski details a history of "the modern commercialization of science" (7). By Mirowski's account, though science has always had a relationship with industry and government, especially through military-funded research, the last few decades have seen a unique relationship between scientific research and a newly corporatized academia. Mirowski traces the concerted effort by neoliberal thinkers—whom he collectively refers to as the Neoliberal Thought Collective (NTC)—to *economize* universities, the primary objective being a transformation of the public availability of scientific research to a privatized model (87-114).

also spectating but acting as the catalyst for Heather's suffering as well.[11] The Spiderhead scientists are dumbfounded at the thought that they should ethically abstain from torturing their subjects. "This is science," Abnesti says in defense of their experiments (72). The role of scientist provides a double cover: he is at once both a necessary cog in the machinery of progress as well as a passive/active observer of the experimental process. This observational mode, what Thomas Nagel disparagingly refers to as "the view from nowhere," is for Saunders a spectatorial position analogous to that of the modernist writer. Occupying this position offers the viewer a comforting narrative of non-involvement, but this position does not suit Saunders, who sees all non-involvement as a reinforcement of alterable processes, as another form of positive thinking.

Unlike Franzen, who ends *The Corrections* with an air of ambivalence toward neoliberal science, and Powers, who I will show to have a relatively favorable—if still partly skeptical—opinion of scientific study, Saunders situates his story within a long line of science-skeptical stories. In such stories, capital "S" Science is cast in the role of the oppressive, amoral dominant institution, bulldozing ahead with the expectation that ethics and morals will come along afterward to legitimize objective progress.[12] In "Escape from Spiderhead," Saunders evaluates scientific domains according to their ethical and moralistic logics. The scientists are not (simply) unethical and affectless cogs in the uncaring scientific machine. They have a set of ethics, but it is one ultimately incompatible with the fate of the individual.[13] For Saunders, modern science takes for granted its own neutrality despite the obvious ideological biases this supposed

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[11] Jurrit Daalder writes that the reader is also cast in the role of complicit spectator. The reader who finishes the story "has tacitly agreed to witness two of these suicides" and has thus participated in Saunders's authorial cruelty (183).

[12] Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is probably the most recognizable novel in this vein, launching the notion of the mad scientist. See also H. G. Wells's 1896 science fiction novel, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, whose eponymous scientist lives alone on an island where he creates human-animal hybrids.

[13] Audrey Ng writes that "Escape from Spiderhead" uses neoliberalism as a context to refute some of Kant's ethical arguments, namely the contradiction under neoliberal capitalism between "obedience to the state" and "the ethical relation to fellow human subjects" (206).

neutrality indicates. Saunders peals back the layers of rhetoric to reveal this stance for what it is. "Escape from Spiderhead" suggests that reductionist modes of scientific research intrinsically affirm the status quo, that science's stated mode of objective neutrality, its "apolitical" stance, is inherently politically motivated: "ideological neutrality," as Kelly writes, "is itself a form of ideology" (47). What makes the story so disturbing is not any evil intentions on the parts of the scientists but their very indifference in the face of human suffering. Hannah Arendt's work on the atomization of responsibility within totalitarian and bureaucratic societies comes painfully to mind.[14]

Positive realism—my term for the kind of positive thinking that insists that all that is, is right—takes the world as it is to represent the world as it must be. "What can you do?" is the ambivalent mantra of the positive realist: "The mandates of science," one of the scientists says late into the story, essentially shrugging his shoulders at the suffering on display in front of him (74). Before Jeff is forced to repeat the Darkenfloxx experiment with Rachel, Abnesti defends the experiment thusly: "A few minutes of unpleasantness for Rachel, […] years of relief for literally tens of thousands of underloving or overloving folks" (75). For Saunders, scientific utopianism has taken on a particular utilitarian flavor. In the scientific utopian register, narratives of progress are generally those in which a species benefits from the sacrifice of an individual or group of individuals. Saunders thwarts this brand of narrative in "Escape from Spiderhead" precisely by allowing his narrator the opportunity to sacrifice himself not merely for the benefit

[14] Arendt introduced the term "banality of evil" in her 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, in which she writes about the trial of Adolf Eichmann for his involvement in the Holocaust. Todd Cesaratto, in "Changes in Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt, Fuhmann, and George Saunders" (2011), forges a convincing link between the description of mid-century totalitarianism in Arendt's writing and Saunders's descriptions of a totalitarian consumerist state in the short story "My Flamboyant Grandson."

of a faceless mass but rather to avoid causing concrete suffering in a knowable individual. The utilitarian one-to-many sacrifice is counteracted by a one-to-one sacrifice.

The ending is not, however, entirely redemptive. Refusing to consent to the administration of Verbaluce™, Jeff forces Abnesti and Verlaine to leave the room so that they can retrieve permission to administer a drug that forces consent. Jeff sees that Abnesti has left behind the drug-administering remote control and self-administers a Darkenfloxx overdose, which leads him to commit suicide using "a corner of the desk" (79). What Saunders dramatizes here, in Jeff's inability to think of any other use for the remote control than his own self-destruction, is the ontological claim that neoliberal capitalism makes. In his book *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher discusses the manner in which capitalism asserted itself in the late 20th century as the only game in town, when Margaret Thatcher notoriously claimed that "there is no alternative" to neoliberal capitalism. The effect that this has had on individuals is to inculcate "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2). This inability to imagine a different world with different rules, which Fisher ascribes specifically to our relation to capitalism, I open up to more diversified contexts with the term *positive realism*. Positive realism as described above may not immediately strike one as an example of positive thinking, but this brand of cynical acquiescence does ultimately fulfill the same role as the seemingly opposite disposition toward the world in which it is taken to be "the best of all possible worlds," in Leibniz's parlance. This acquiescence amounts to the claim that, if it may not be the best of all possible worlds, it is in fact the *only* possible world.[15] Saunders challenges

[15] It is also not uncharacteristic for positive thinking and its figureheads to inject a bit of cynicism into their discourse. As Ehrenreich writes, "The flip side of positive thinking is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must [be] because you didn't try hard enough, didn't believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success" (8). Further, Rhonda Byrne even goes as far as to blame

this claim in "Escape from Spiderhead" by substituting materialism's literalist lens with spiritualism.

"Escape from Spiderhead" ends with the narrator speaking from the immediate afterlife, in the form of a ghost. "What's death like?" Jeff asks, answering, "You're briefly unlimited" (79). Structurally, this ending allows Jeff to reflect, uncompromised by mind-altering drugs, on his experience and endow his death with meaning. "I could see it all," he reports ambiguously (80). At the same time that Jeff's suicide avoids causing the suffering of another, his post-suicide narration affirms a spiritual element of existence explicitly denied to him in life while under the control of Abnesti's materialist experiments. This is not unique to this story; Saunders concludes many of his stories in this manner.[16] The invocation of a spiritual element to existence does, of course, explicitly contradict materialist assumptions. The move Saunders makes at the end of "Escape from Spiderhead" can appear a bit like an escape in itself, a skirting of the issue of ontological debate via an outmoded appeal to spiritualistic dualism. As we will see in the next section, a refutation of certain materialist principles need not involve an invocation of spiritualism. In the final moments of "Escape from Spiderhead," Jeff observes the tragedy of people born with the genetic propensity for committing acts of violence. From his perspective, "their crooked destinies had lain dormant within them, seeds awaiting water and light to bring forth the most violent, life-poisoning flowers, said water/light actually being the requisite combination of neurological tendency and environmental activation" (79). This tragedy is cast upon them "by God" rather than objective biological processes (79). This section of the story is

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victims of disasters—both manmade and natural—for their own suffering, arguing that "they had to be on the same frequency as the event" (quoted in Cederström and Spicer 81). The seemingly benign saying that "everything happens for a reason" is in the hands of many avatars of positive thinking a legitimization of suffering and cruelty.

[16] Saunders also deploys ghost endings in "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," the title story from his first collection; "The End of FIRPO in the World" from *Pastoralia*; and "Commcomm" from *In Persuasion Nation*. "Brad Carrigan, American," to which I will return in the next chapter, is another story in this vein.

confusing. If the human capacity for meaningful choice appears to be the animating theme in "Escape from Spiderhead," allusions to genetic determination would contradict this to a point. Though genetic inheritance and human agency are fruitful subjects for my study, they are not ones which Saunders explores in any more detail than I have quoted above. Richard Powers, however, offers in *Generosity* (2009) an extended analysis of the relationship between genetic science, neoliberalism, and positive thinking.

"Pinning Pollyanna to the dissecting table": Richard Powers's *Generosity* and the Genetic Basis of Happiness

In *Generosity*, Powers restages the old nature versus nurture debate, but he does so in a very specific way. In the new millennium, after the Human Genome Project's near-complete sequencing of the human genome between 1990 and 2003 had discovered convincing genetic coding for attributes ranging from temperament to behavior to allergies and even propensities for certain illnesses, the nurture side of the debate lost some credibility as an explanatory method ("An Overview of the Human Genome Project"). However, what Nessa Carey refers to as "the epigenetics revolution" has unveiled the important caveat within genomic science that genes function not according to deterministic laws but "more like a script" (2), in which outside factors such as the environment can have crucial effects on how genes behave (4-7). This important revelation within genomic science has been largely glossed over in media coverage, which tends to reiterate what Eileen Webb and Kieran Tranter refer to as the "central dogma," which states that "entities can be known from their genes, that a detailed map provides the 'essence' or 'code'

for a living thing" (170). Without ever actually referencing the field of epigenetics, Powers presents a novel about the intersection of nature and nurture that refuses to privilege one unambiguously. He articulates his views on this intersection in a 2001 interview with Jeffrey Williams:

> You can't understand a person completely in any sense, unless that sense takes into consideration all of the contexts that that person inhabits. And a person at the end of the second millennium inhabits more contexts than any specialized discipline can easily name. We are shaped by runaway technology, by the apotheosis of business and markets, by sciences that occasionally seem on the verge of completing themselves or collapsing under their own runaway success. This is the world we live in. If you think of the novel as a supreme connection machine—the most complex artifact of networking that we've ever developed—then you have to ask how a novelist would dare leave out 95% of the picture. ("The Last Generalist" 104)

Powers's argument here is that novelists have a responsibility to represent as many of these developments as possible. *Generosity* is a firm example of a work of art in this mode, telling the story of a pessimistic creative writing teacher, Russell, confronted by the unbending optimism of one of his female students, an Algerian immigrant named Thassa. It is a novel that tries to capture the dizzying interconnectivity of self-help books, popular neuroscientific and genetic research, neoliberal capitalism, social networks, and literary narrative. Connecting all these threads is positive thinking, a cultural discourse of which Powers is mostly skeptical but occasionally supportive. In his analysis of positive thinking, Powers uses as a kind of source text for *Generosity* an unlikely children's story from the early 20th century.

One night in class the students argue over whether there are more or less than 24 story plots—a number arrived at by Frederick P. Harmon, the fictional author of the class's core text on writing, *Making Your Writing Come Alive*. Russell observes as they argue that the plot he sees in the form of Thassa "is one plot no one will ever bother writing down: *A happy girl passes through the world's wretchedness and stays happy*" (40, italics in the original). However, this plot as he outlines it has already appeared, most famously in the form of a fictional girl by the name of Pollyanna. In a way, *Generosity* is a retelling of Eleanor H. Porter's young adult novel, *Pollyanna* (1913), in the age of data-tracking, social media, positive psychology, and genetic science.[17] Porter's novel tells the story of a girl, Pollyanna, who is orphaned and sent to live with her lonely, cynical Aunt Polly. Though orphaned, Pollyanna is no cynic; rather, she is extraordinarily positive and upbeat, so much so that Aunt Polly's servants—used to their employer's negativity—are skeptical of Pollyanna upon first meeting her. Pollyanna heroically resists the negativity that one might expect from a young orphan girl, preferring instead to treat any kind of negative thought with an overdose of positivity, a mental effort she calls "the 'just being glad' game" (22). She explains further, "most generally there is something about everything that you can be glad about, if you keep hunting long enough to find it" (34). Over time the character's name has been turned into a term of scorn for those who are overly optimistic. Thassa, like Pollyanna, is an orphan girl: in Thassa's case, she is an orphaned refugee from the civil war-torn Algiers, whose father was assassinated for his politics and whose mother died of an illness. Also like Pollyanna, Thassa is a dyed-in-the-wool optimist. Thassa's optimism, like Pollyanna's own, confuses all the characters in the story. The suggestion raised by this confusion is that the girls' optimism does not fit with their biographies. Thassa matches

[17] Joseph Dewey persuasively argues that Powers's "fiction has often privileged children's stories as models" (13).

Pollyanna's declaration of the possibility of positivity in every negative situation with a positive line of her own: "What you can't find in life […] you have to make yourself!" (38) Powers directly references *Pollyanna* in the novel in the televised debate between a literary novelist and the novel's central scientific figure, geneticist Thomas Kurton, who studies (and patents) Thassa's genes and cites her as evidence of the genetic basis of happiness. Having all but lost the debate, the novelist mutters at one point that Kurton's approach to genetic happiness is "pinning Pollyanna to the dissecting table" (151). Unlike Pollyanna, however, Thassa does not end the novel in pure bliss, having converted everyone around her to the optimistic spirit she embodies. In *Generosity*, Powers offers a substantial revision of the children's novel. If the world that Pollyanna occupied provided her with enough support such that she was able to transform the people around her rather than be brought down by them, Powers's revision of that general arc either critiques the optimism of Porter's novel or suggests a substantial cultural difference between 1913 America and 2009 America. Overall the novel does not appear critical of Thassa's own effort to see everything in the most positive of lights, figuring it as a generous act of imaginative fiction, what Powers calls in a 2007 interview for *The Echo Maker* the "empathetic leap that lies at the heart of fiction" (Michod). The foils to this "empathetic leap" in *Generosity* are the powers of science and capital.

Powers explores two distinct factors of neoliberal science that align it with a kind of positive thinking. The first, familiar to us by now, is the way in which a reductionist materialism reinforces the status quo. By identifying the individual according to his or her genetic makeup, reductionist genetic science implicitly denies the impact of outside factors such as the environment. This denial essentially amounts to an acceptance of the world as it is. For Powers, this problem of positive realism is not merely confined to self-help and reductionist materialism

but also glorified in the tradition of psychological realism, as I argued about *The Corrections*. The second site of critique in *Generosity* is the late-20th century intellectual movement, transhumanism, which—though based on scientific premises and pursued through technological innovation—has been met with considerable scorn within the mainstream scientific community. Curiously enough, Powers brings together both reductionist materialism and transhumanism in the geneticist Kurton. He does this, I argue, to illuminate the positive thinking that lies at the hearts of these two disciplines.

As I argued about "Escape from Spiderhead," though reductionist materialism and positive thinking look on the surface like entirely opposite ways of interpreting the world, under neoliberalism they both tend to agree upon an individualization of circumstances and change, and this commonality shows especially in regard to how both fields have approached the pursuit of happiness. *Generosity* takes aim at all the popular modes of achieving happiness in the 21st century. Positive psychology, self-help, therapy, and therapeutically informed television shows in the mold of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* all feature in the novel as sites of examination and critique. Russell works for a self-help magazine, *Becoming You*, and quotes regularly from positive psychological texts and studies; Russell's love interest, Candace Weld, is a therapist at the university at which Russell teaches; and Thassa makes an appearance on a talk-show run by a woman, Oona, who strikes a remarkable resemblance to real-world Oprah, whose talk-show was famous for its emphasis on both attaining happiness and self-reliance. The novel is also a sort of checklist for modern materialist scientific disciplines, featuring a range of mainstream scientific thought and implicitly holding it up to scrutiny. Among the materialist sciences explored in the novel is evolutionary psychology, which sees its support in the hands of Kurton who writes, "Depression had its uses once, when mankind was on the run. But now that we're somewhat

safe, it's time to free the subjugated populace and show what the race can do, armed with sustainable satisfaction at last" (43). This view matches rather closely Martin Seligman's views on contemporary melancholy, and the prevailing opinion among positive psychologists, that such melancholy exists as a residual evolutionary phenomenon. [18] Seligman is making this assertion within his liberal humanist theory that the individual needs to free himself from his inherited confines through purposeful training of the mind. In the hands of a geneticist, however, this claim seems out of place. Surely if genes code human behavior toward distinct tendencies, we have a limited ability to exceed the limits of our genetic coding. This contradiction is no mistake, however. Kurton and his nonfictional counterpart, Seligman, are referring to a process described not in mainstream scientific literature but rather in the pamphlets and manifestos of the transhumanist movement.

In an encyclopedic book on the various pursuits within transhumanism, R. U. Sirius and Jay Cornell write skeptically about evolutionary psychology. While they note that transhumanism generally accepts the theories within that field of study, they also write that transhumanists "see themselves as hacking (trying to overcome) the diktats of Darwinian biology" (Sirius and Cornell 71). What they describe here is what Chris Hables Gray, in *Cyborg Citizen*, calls "participatory evolution," the notion that humans should "consciously evolve" and "shape our future through multiple human choices" (3). Gray tellingly misattributes the phrase *participatory evolution* to Manfred Clynes, who, along with Nathan Kline, coined the term

[18] Stephen Gould and Richard Lewontin refer to this kind of evolutionary argument as "the adaptationist programme, or the Panglossian paradigm" (584) after the fictional Leibnizian character in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759). In their 1979 essay "The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm," they argue that the Panglossian paradigm is at fault "for its failure to distinguish current utility from reasons for origin […] for its unwillingness to consider alternatives to adaptive stories; for its reliance upon plausibility alone as a criterion for accepting speculative tales" (147). Daniel C. Dennett challenges their arguments in his 1983 article, "Intentional Systems in Cognitive Ethology," in which he defends the adaptationist perspective generally and claims that Gould and Lewontin come to weaker conclusions than their paper promises.

"cyborg" in their essay on the future of space travel, which starts with the claim: "Space travel challenges mankind not only technologically but also spiritually, in that it invites man to take an active part in his own biological evolution" (Clynes and Kline 26). While the authors refer here to an idea akin to "participatory evolution," the phrase itself in fact has origins in distinctly theological work by a man curiously mentioned in *Generosity*.

When Kurton is first introduced to the reader in "The Genie and the Genome," a show designed by skeptic Tonia Schiff to showcase and challenge breakthrough studies in genomic science, Kurton tells Schiff that his mantra is a quote from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "*Our duty, as men and women, is to proceed as if limits to our ability did not exist. We are collaborators in creation*" (25, italics in the original). That Kurton would use as his mantra the words of Teilhard seems strange, given the latter's considerable rejection by the scientific community.[19] Schiff recognizes the oddity of a genetic scientist carrying around the words of a theologian, asking, "Wasn't he a Christian mystic?" (25). Teilhard (1881-1955) was a mid-20th century Christian mystic and paleontologist famous for his theory of human evolution, which he wrote about in numerous books, culminating in the posthumously published *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955). Teilhard writes in *The Phenomenon of Man* of an evolution driven by conscious human activity much in the same vein of that which has been proposed by the transhumanists.[20] Teilhard describes consciousness in humans as something that sets them uniquely apart from other creatures, that this particular characteristic is a product of evolution itself, and that evolution is "reducible to and identifiable with a progress towards thought" (221). This evolution

[19] Richard Dawkins, for example, refers to Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955) as "the quintessence of bad poetic science" (*Unweaving the Rainbow* 184-5). Daniel C. Dennett writes in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) of Teilhard's work, "it has become clear to the point of unanimity among scientists that Teilhard offered nothing serious in the way of an alternative to orthodoxy; the ideas that were peculiarly his were confused, and the rest was just bombastic redescription of orthodoxy" (320).

[20] Julian Huxley, generally considered the founder of modern transhumanism, provided a lengthy preface to *The Phenomenon of Man*, in which he largely agrees with many of Teilhard's theories.

does not stop with the production of thought, however. Instead, humans are voluntarily and consciously "participating in evolution," an idea that would find a home in the theory of transhumanism (221). Teilhard de Chardin's theory is a sort of evolutionary teleology whereby human activity and consciousness is naturally directed toward a definitive, convergent point he refers to as "Omega" (259). Mark O'Connell, in his study of transhumanism, describes the movement as motivated by the "same immemorial yearnings and frustrations" at the heart of religious faith (164). All the talk of controlling evolution through technological innovation is just an updated version of the religious search for immortality.[21] However, whereas religious faith generally entails the subservience to some deity or deities, transhumanism places "its faith in the power and benevolence of techno-capitalism" (179). Kurton also places his faith in techno-capitalism, even if he takes it for granted as a determining force in his research.

Though Kurton seems genuinely indifferent to the wealth promised by his research, he cannot escape the dictates of economics as a driving force behind his research. When Thassa moves to sell her eggs to private buyers—assumedly for use in reproduction—for a reported $32,000, Kurton files a suit claiming a patent on Thassa's genes. His argument is that his company is responsible for discovering the correlation between Thassa's genes and the increased propensity for happiness and thus should stand to gain from any profits made by the sale of those genes (271). This move, however, leads to Kurton's own downfall. The suit is a failure, and the company receives bad press, resulting in declining stocks. The board of directors ultimately chooses to cut ties with Kurton. In his final moments in the novel, Kurton muses on what brought him to this moment. "All life long," Powers writes, "he has believed in the one nonarbitrary enterprise, fairer than any politics, truer than any religion, deeper than any artwork:

[21] And as I discussed in detail in the previous chapter, this search for immortality—or "denial of death" in Ernest Becker's words—has some fairly clear connections with positive thinking.

measurement" (295). If he thought somehow that the scientific act of measurement was altogether unrelated to the economic act of measurement that resulted in his forced resignation, he would be misguided. It is, ironically, a gesture of measurement that leads the company to decide Kurton's limited utility. This measurement, this act of quantification which sees so much critique in the novel, lies at the heart of the scientific method and the neoliberal construction of the subject. Powers tries to counteract the incessant neoliberal and scientific quantification of Thassa in the novel by offering a form of *qualification* available to literature.

The novel is notably characterized by continual narratorial intrusions into the story, commenting on both the construction of the story as well as the construction of stories generally. Bernard Kelly, writing a review of *Generosity* for *The Toronto Star*, laments the narrator's intrusions into the narrative, writing that "asking us to overlook the conventionality of his plot is by now a firmly established convention in itself." What Kelly misses, however, is that the narrator is not "asking us to overlook the conventionality of his plot" so much as bringing attention to the conventionality so as to say something about free will as it manifests—or does not—within the confines of narrative. The purpose of this attention is to avoid the intellectual trap of a literary takedown of modern science that scapegoats the latter in preference for the former, a didactic formulation that would hold up literature as a sacred space. Rather, Powers utilizes metafictional techniques to treat realist fiction with the same sort of skepticism that he aims at modern genetics, the two sharing similar faults.

If reductionist materialism can be said to reduce reality and existence to only that which is observable, Powers suggests in *Generosity* that realist fiction commits a similar type of reductionism, a typology in the vein of the Jungian archetypology of character and plot. Kurton muses at one point in the novel about the present state of fiction and its future possibilities. For

him, realist fiction is "willfully naïve" about the role of individual willpower as well as environmental determinants in characterizing people's lives and outcomes (249). Fiction consistently confuses correlation and causation in its use of personal histories to explain behavior, a mistake he refers to as "environmental determinism more reductive than anything that has ever come out of [his] labs" (249). Kurton imagines "a new, post-genomic fiction" that recognizes and stages the effects of both inherited and learned behaviors, "that grasps the interpenetrating loops of inheritance and upbringing so tangled that every cause is some other cause's effect" (249). For the reader, Kurton's sudden acceptance of a more epigeneticist theoretical disposition is a bit confusing, as Powers does much in the preceding story to establish Kurton as a firm old-school geneticist who buys into hard genetic inheritance. However, Kurton's thoughts ring true for what the novel says about more traditional realist fiction. If reductionist models of genetic inheritance oversimplify and underdetermine explanatory methods for individual psyches, realist fiction in the psychological mode is at least as guilty of a similar reduction of the psyche to simple psychoanalytically based explanations like childhood experiences and parental upbringing. This is especially noticeable in Franzen's *The Corrections*, in which individuals' behaviors are consistently explained by flashbacks to scenes in their childhoods. For Powers, this "environmental determinism" is an unsuitable replacement for the genetic determinism against which the humanities so consistently wage battle. Powers dramatizes the dehumanizing effects of psychological realism in Thassa's downfall, a fate triggered not by the scientist's microscope but by a writer's insufficient imagination.

When Russell is reading one of his happiness manuals, he comes across definitions for two conditions from which he believes Thassa might be suffering: hyperthymia and hypomania. He thinks to himself after discovering these diagnoses, "The woman has something that should

be looked at" (73). Karin Hopker writes, "Science and psychology soon pathologize Thassa's exceptional happiness as a state of persisting hyperthymia" (288), but this is inaccurate. Russell is in fact the individual who first pathologizes Thassa, and this is an important detail in relation to what the novel has to say about the kinds of explanatory methods that psychological realism accepts and propagates. Because she does not fit a simple narrative model (orphan girl looks grimly upon the world), the thought goes, she must have some interesting mental illness. Russell's pathologizing of Thassa mimics the kind of reductionism for which Roth criticizes neuronovels, which stage aesthetic innovation as neuro-realistic depictions of neuro-atypicality. Perhaps because he is a nonfiction writer, Russell relies purely on psychological explanations for Thassa's behavior. This pathologizing figures as the first site of the novel's critique of reification, the objectification of an individual, the breaking down of the human into her constituent parts. Russell's act prefigures the more extreme objectifications of Thassa by both Kurton's scientific studies of her and her consumption by the mass media and population at large.

Russell's pathologizing brings together the loose threads of positive thinking, transhumanism, reductionist materialism, and neoliberal capitalism. His objectification of Thassa mimics the scientific objectification of the individual as a thing to be studied. This objectification also features in the instrumentalization of human conduct imagined by both transhumanism and modern positive thinking discourse, both of which are heavily influenced by neoliberal constructions of subjectivity. It is this objectification, this dehumanization, that leads directly to Thassa's downfall and eventual death by suicide. On *The Oona Show*, where the reader gets a first glimpse of Thassa's emotional fragility, the narrator describes Thassa as a "trained seal of elation," there for the entertainment and education of the audience (238). It is exactly this

dehumanizing objectification—of human into animal—against which Thassa rebels in the interview, ending ultimately in the audience's—and later the general public's—hatred of her. As a primary plot thread—is Thassa constitutionally unable to think negative thoughts, or is her outward positivity shadowed by bouts of consumptive negativity?—it never sees an answer by the end of the story. The "cause" of her happiness is left largely unanswered, and the extent of her capacity for positivity is called into further question when eventually, under the pressure from people who want what she has, she commits suicide.

Positive psychology, self-help, and reductionist materialist science represent an image of the possible determined by an adherence to the rationality of the actual. Fiction, however, need not content itself merely with the observable realities of the given world, as Powers reveals in *Generosity*. Fiction can open up new possibilities of seeing and understanding existence. It operates within a temporality that lived life never can, through the logic of revision. "All writing is rewriting" is a mantra from Harmon's fictional creative writing manual that sees consistent usage throughout the novel (Powers 37). What Powers is saying here is that all writing rewrites early models, that stories have "genes" that are partly determinate and partly improvable. Harmon's mantra can be read simply as a statement about the literal revision of a draft of writing, but Powers intends in its repetition to say something about the way that writing is the natural mode of human imagination and creativity. A fundamental turning point occurs very late in the novel, when Russell and Thassa are in a car together, attempting to enter Canada to escape the media circus around Thassa. Russell brings up in conversation a person about whom Thassa wrote in one of her stories for class. When he relates to Thassa that he often thinks about this woman and what she is doing, Thassa tells him that the person was fictional: "'There is no woman,' Thassa says" (303). In response to his incredulity, Thassa reminds him, "You said

creative" (303). Later, when they arrive at a hotel room due to complications at the border, Russell agonizes over the idea that Thassa's essays in class were all lies. This leads him naturally to the thought that her "essays are not her only fiction" (307), that her entire personality is itself a fiction, her positivity an invention. He realizes that Kurton's method of measuring Thassa's temperamental set point was exclusively through her own reporting: "Even science asked her to tell them a story" (307). The importance of this discovery to the core themes of the novel is revealed when the reader makes note of what is a central irony throughout the story. Early in the novel Thassa is assigned the nickname Miss Generosity by her classmates, who give her the nickname to account for her generosity of spirit. However, the novel is propelled not by Thassa's generosity, an outward-directed attitude, but rather by others' desires to find the source for her happiness, an inward feeling. What Thassa achieves in her affecting "creative" nonfictions is an act of generosity from writer to reader. She imagines the world as it could or should be. She directs her generous spirit outward to the world. Given this reading, it becomes easier to understand the ending of the novel as another act of creation rather than of telling.

The reader is given several clues as to the exact events that occur at the end of the novel. Russell and Thassa are still in the hotel room. Russell sits watching a sleeping Thassa until eventually he notices that all the anti-depressants he had with him have gone missing. When Russell comes to the realization that the sleeping Thassa is possibly dying or dead, the narrator relates, "And in that instant of annihilation, art at last overtakes him, and he writes" (314). What follows is ostensibly Russell's attempt to save her: "He can rescind this," the narrator tells us (314). When Russell's attempts fail him, the reader is told, "He can do nothing for her but revise" (315). The use of writerly words here suggests that Thassa's survival as she is lifted away in a helicopter ambulance, as well as her appearance in the last portion of the novel, is pure

fabulation. After the helicopter has come to race Thassa to the nearest hospital, the novel jumps to Algiers, where Tonia Schiff meets Thassa to perform one last interview. When Schiff brings out her camera to record, Thassa says, "You know that's not possible anymore" (318), suggesting that Thassa no longer exists as such. Instead, what we are given is an imagined ending, a generous fabulation. Given that the world Thassa inhabited ultimately drove her to suicide, the ending diverges greatly from what I argue is its source material, *Pollyanna*. Thassa does not get by—let alone flourish—in the world as it is, buoyed by her unlikely positivity. Though she spreads her positive spirit outward to the world, the world does not treat her in kind. The world kills her, and it is only Russell's generous (and redemptive) act of creativity and imagination that provides for her an ending that matches in reciprocation the generosity Thassa brought to the world when living.

For Powers, in agreement with neoliberalism, human willpower is a fundamental source for change, but the willpower Powers imagines here is one devoted neither to capital accumulation nor to perpetual self-instrumentalization. A line from Camus's 1951 book, *The Rebel*, serves as the novel's epigraph: "*La vraie générosité envers l'avenir consiste à tout donner au present*." Loosely translated, it reads, "True generosity toward the future means giving our all to the present." Future-oriented discourses factor heavily in the novel: from transhumanism's effort to take control of evolution and transcend mortality; to the boundless expansionism of capitalist growth; to the commitment to positive thinking within the larger neoliberal project of improving the self. The central word in the line, insofar as it pertains to *Generosity*, must be "giving": not "being" our all but "giving" our all. The most rebellious acts in the novel, those which transcend discourses of determinism and limited possibilities so directly, are willful acts of selflessness. Thassa's generosity is bested by her world's insatiable desire to self-improve and

hack the human code. She is reduced to a pathology, reduced to her genes, and finally reduced to the price of her eggs, fit for the creation of a genetic replica. It is unsurprising she does not survive all this reduction.

Conclusion

All the writers in this chapter try in their own ways to "answer" reductionist materialism. In *The Corrections,* Franzen depicts a political background in which the basic premises of neoliberal capitalism have been accepted and confirmed. While often critical of this economic consensus and the manner in which it infects individual subjectivities, Franzen's mimesis of a world with no alternative to capitalism reads much like a capitulation. For Franzen, the novel determines particular sorts of stories. It can no longer be the job of the novel to take on an entire culture. Instead, the writer of fiction is responsible for an aesthetics of refuge, a retreat for the reader into a world of unreality where the problems of politics should be set aside. Franzen's aestheticization of Gary's neoliberal psyche stands among the most vivid in contemporary literature, but Franzen's only alternative to this psyche is the limited communal space of the family, and his only form of critique is satire. While Franzen (and Powers) offer *narrative* alternatives to reductionism, Saunders offers an *ontological* alternative. His alternative to materialism in "Escape from Spiderhead" is a substance dualism, a mind-body split in which the former is released after the destruction of the latter. Materialist sciences only have the power to destroy our material existences (and in his fictional world, they will), but freedom always awaits us on the other side. Powers, unlike Franzen, imagines an alternative to reductionism, even if that alternative seems (at least for now) available only within the confines of literature itself. For Powers, it is a mistake to challenge reductionist materialisms by merely denouncing all the

findings made in those disciplines. It is not enough in a contemporary setting to simply dismiss science outright; reductionism needs to be challenged more explicitly with an anti-reductionism, a literary mode where the human is no longer broken down but fully explored, understood in as many contexts as the medium will allow. As in both Franzen and Saunders, Powers depicts a world where neoliberal capitalism and scientific materialism operate in near-perfect harmony, a social world where individuals seek material cures for their spiritual deficiencies. Fiction, and the act of imagination that conceives it, offers a site of transcendence rather than refuge, where people can imagine worlds other than their own. Powers offers not a praxis but a hopeful tear in the curtain of capitalist and scientific realism, providing a space for imagined—and imaginative—alternatives. For Saunders and Powers, at least, the oppressive worlds described in their fiction allow for moments of transcendental resistance, even if they only either lead to or spring forth from death. In "Escape from Spiderhead," Jeff's act of resistance takes the form of a sacrificial suicide. Faced with impossible choices, he merely opts out, and his reward for this choice is the transformation into a spiritual bird. In *Generosity*, Russell resists reductionist methodologies in favor of fabulation. The novel ends with a hopeful end for the doomed Thassa by way of a generous fictionalization by a man who failed her in life. In the chapter to follow, I will look at three texts that offer different and more trenchant forms of resistance—three works of fiction trying to revive an ethos of negative thinking.

Chapter 4

Accentuate the Negative: Negative Thinking, Neoliberal Time, and Capitalist Realism in Saunders, Kushner, and Whitehead

As the contemporary American author who has the most to say explicitly about positive thinking, it follows that George Saunders has also had quite a bit to say about negative thinking. For Saunders, intrinsic to the process of de-conditioning positive thinking as the sole narrative lens through which the individual understands both his life and the world around him is breaking away from attachments to utility or instrumentalization. In a weekly column in *The Guardian* titled "American Psyche," which spanned the years 2006-2008 and has been overlooked within scholarship on his work, Saunders wrote small, roughly 500-word satirical essays about current topics and sometimes more generally about writing. The first of these essays begins with the line, "I hate complainers," before later laying out a supposed "American way" of "not complaining," arguing that "Critical thought=negativity" ("American Psyche"). In another installment of this column—in non-traditional fashion given a different title, "The American Way"—Saunders satirically introduces the English people to an American custom he finds lacking across the pond: "the American ethic called Positive Thinking." He writes, "Say someone drives a steel spike through your head. Granted: a bad break. But why whine about it? All the screaming and weeping in the world is not going to cause that spike to work its way out." Here Saunders aligns the framework of modern positive thinking with a theory of utility. In the circumstance Saunders presents, the problem ("a steel spike through your head") is seen to have two possible responses: whining (negative thinking) and positive thinking. Whining is determined by Saunders's satirical, positive narrator to not have any utility in solving the "problem" of a steel spike in the

head; therefore it has no value at all. According to this schema, positive thinking has value as a mindset which affects the subject doing the thinking, whereas negative thinking has no value, as it lacks any positive affective ability; it merely critiques. This, of course, raises the question of why human emotional reactions would enter the realm of notions of utility at all. Negative thinking has not escaped, nevertheless, the utilitarian approach to happiness that positive thinking and positive psychology have embraced. As some Americans have grown jaded by positive thinking's unfulfilled promises, countless articles and books have proceeded to detail the life-saving magic of negative thinking, with all the gusto and flair one has come to expect from self-help texts. Dozens of blogs and reputable news sources feature articles and essays with the repetitive and catchy title, "The Power of Negative Thinking."[1] Journalist Oliver Burkeman even wrote a bestselling self-help book on the topic, titled *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking* (2012). More importantly for my purposes here, Saunders's short treatment above, and the very existence of positive thinking as a philosophical school, raises the question as to what constitutes this thing we call *negative thinking*.

Just as I have shown positive thinking to be an often nebulous term, morphing from context to context and person to person, so too does negative thinking take on several meanings as it is explained by people of differing—and sometimes contradicting—philosophical and political dispositions. For Saunders in the first passage above, negative thinking is both complaining and "critical thought," but in the second example negative thinking is a register of

[1] Adam Grant writes in "The Positive Power of Negative Thinking" (2013), published on *Psychology Today*, that negativity proves more *useful* to some people as a tool for success. Sarah Elizabeth Adler, writing for *The Atlantic*, argues in "The Power of Negative Thinking" (2018) that numerous psychological studies extol the benefits of a more negative disposition. Atul Gawande published his article, "The Power of Negative Thinking" (2007), in *The New York Times* and identifies several different scenarios in which negative thinking is more useful than positive thinking. The list goes on. While these sources help to contradict the dominant cultural attitudes toward positive and negative thinking, their intention of saving negativity from its tabooed state is spoiled by a common attachment to emotional instrumentalism.

specifically individual and internal discontent (or "whining"). Elsewhere in Saunders's fiction negative thinking indicates anything from reflection to feeling—from critical thought to melancholy. Oftentimes, as in "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," "Pastoralia," and "Exhortation," negative thinking is any thought that criticizes dominant business practices. In "Bounty," discontent with institutionalized racism and disenfranchisement is considered negative thinking. In "Jon," the simple act of mourning the death of a newborn baby falls under this category of forbidden thought. This variation in definition of negative thinking is also observed in the texts from those on either side of the positive and negative thinking debate. For advocates of positive thinking especially, negative thinking has taken on many meanings.

Ralph Waldo Trine, an early leader in the New Thought movement and one of the first to transition New Thought directly into a doctrine of positive thinking as we understand it today, argues in *In Tune with the Infinite* (1899) that New Thought's goal is to turn pessimists into optimists. Trine writes, "The pessimist, by virtue of his limitations, is making his own hell, and in the degree that he makes his own hell is he helping to make one for all mankind" (10). Horatio W. Dresser, a second-generation leader in the New Thought movement, writes in the introduction to *The Spirit of the New Thought* (1917), "If one is downhearted, depressed and inactive, one meets the circumstances of life in a negative manner, weakening before them, inviting failure" (2). In *Think and Grow Rich!* (1937), Napoleon Hill supplies a useful list of negative emotions, identifying the seven negative emotions as "FEAR," "JEALOUSY," "HATRED," "REVENGE," "GREED," "SUPERSTITION," and "ANGER" (184). Norman Vincent Peale writes in *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) "that we manufacture our unhappiness by thinking unhappy thoughts […] such as the negative feeling that everything is going to turn out badly, or that other people are getting what they do not deserve and we are

failing to get what we do deserve" (79). Positive psychology has had much to say about positivity and negativity. In general, this school of thought has aligned itself with the simplified notion asserted early on by positive thinking that positivity equals happiness and negativity equals unhappiness. Following Hill's example, Martin Seligman avoids buzzwords like *positive thinking* and *negative thinking*, referring instead to "negative emotions" in his book *Authentic Happiness* (2006), including in his list of such emotions "fear, sadness, and anger" (30). Seligman does, however, argue for a link between negative emotions and negative patterns of thought, suggesting that overemphasizing negative emotions leads to a pessimistic thinking pattern. This alignment of negative thinking with pessimism is a distinctly rhetorical maneuver, an oversimplified straw man conjured to grant legitimacy to the optimistic worldview. Surely one need not be a pessimist in order to register a negative sentiment.

This thesis has been haunted throughout not only by the yes-men fetishized by positive thinking and neoliberal governmentality but also necessarily by those subjects' structural others: negative thinkers. Throughout my study of contemporary American authors grappling with the present-day problems presented by an optimistic disposition, there have been manifestations of viable alternatives to this discourse. Chip Lambert, in Franzen's *The Corrections*, is a character whose stated anger toward the systems of governmentality turns out to be a symptom of his envy of the upper class. Likewise Powers's *Gain* features an unlikely agitator in the character of Don, who stresses the importance of self-discipline and the power of positive thinking while attempting an underground resistance to the mega-conglomerate Clare Corporation. If most of the authors featured have been fairly respectful of the cynical or even pessimistic disposition, characters imbued with this characteristic have tended to suffer cruel fates: Jeff, the protagonist of Saunders's "Escape from Spiderhead," sees suicide as the only viable alternative to sadistic

science experiments; Jonah, in Park's *Personal Days*, is consigned to a busted-elevator purgatory in his attempt to fully understand the nature of his company's mysterious layoffs; the already marginalized dissenting women in DeWitt's *Lightning Rods* are ostensibly doomed to a lifetime of unstable—and possibly quasi-consensual sexual—labor after the takeoff success of Joe's workplace prostitution service; and Eggers's *The Circle* features several dissenting characters who either die or go to jail as a consequence of their skepticism toward the titular company's business practices. The authors in the present chapter give more narrative space to those unwilling to keep up a cheery disposition and in doing so provide various means of imagining what resistance to positive thinking—and its real-world political consequences—might look like. Examining the texts that follow allows me to consider who is allowed to think negatively and how they do so. I will develop my argument by investigating what negative thinking looks like from different subject positions, moving from Saunders's white male protagonist in "Brad Carrigan, American," to the Bildungsroman heroine of Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, to the African American "average" man at the center of Whitehead's *Zone One*.

Consistent in all the following texts is an agreement that the present—and, in the case of Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, the near past—is characterized by a resignation to the given state of things, that state being the neoliberal form of capitalism. Francis Fukuyama famously declared that the disintegration of the Soviet Union at the end of the 20th century signaled the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy as the only remaining forms that politics at "the end of history" could take. The supposed victory of capitalism led many to abandon the pursuit of political alternatives, a state that Mark Fisher dubs "capitalist realism." Fisher uses this term to describe "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent

alternative to it" (2). It is this state that is the point of departure for the texts in the present chapter. Saunders's short story, "Brad Carrigan, American," gives a representative account of a character oppositional to both his dominant culture and the mode of thought, positive thinking, that structures that culture. In the story, the titular character is the star of either a reality television show or a sitcom, and he is alone among the cast in regard to his capacity for compassion. This compassion is consistently dismissed as negativity, however, something which is deemed unacceptable for the show's audience, so much so that Brad is "recast" and sent into a kind of televisual purgatory by the story's end. Saunders pursues in this story a representation of negative thinking on the individual level, attempting to forge a relationship between negative thinking and ethical thought and action. Saunders's vision, however, limits the prospects for negative thinking to individual concerns and largely forecloses on the possibility of political or historical forms of negativity.

I continue my analysis of literary negativity, then, with Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, a novel that meaningfully engages with the political and historical dimensions of negation, specifically Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno's account of a *negative dialectic*. *The Flamethrowers* stages the typical novel of individual development, the *Bildungsroman*, for a time when historical development is all but stunted. And though Kushner's novel foregrounds the individual in the novel's generic form, she is less concerned than Saunders in imagining negative thought at the level of individual psychology. The novel is structured through an interplay between traditional *Bildung* narration and the impacts of radical thought and action. *The Flamethrowers* imagines not only what collective negativity can look like—by way of describing a historical moment in which it was rampant—but also, and primarily, the forms

available to literature in expressing this negativity. As I will argue, *The Flamethrowers* uses Adorno's concept of the negative dialectic as its structuring motif.

I will end the chapter by turning to Colson Whitehead's groundbreaking literary zombie novel, *Zone One*. In *Zone One,* the world has been overrun by zombies, and it is the job of "sweepers" like the novel's African American protagonist, Mark Spitz, to build up the ruins of civilization so that the world can return to normal. This "return to normal," however, entails the resurrection of pre-apocalyptic forms of thought and being. Two such forms include positive thinking and the neoliberal form of capitalism, parroted in the novel by the interim governing body of the United States. Whitehead continues Kushner's critique with an allegorical spin, representing the eschatology behind Fukuyama's claims about "the end of history" in the form of a post-apocalyptic zombie novel. *Zone One* aims its critique at the way in which capitalist realism has evidenced the death of political thought. If the triumph of capitalism has truly led to history's end, then *Zone One* imagines that end's survivors as the living dead.

"Poor things": Compassion as Negative Thinking in George Saunders's "Brad Carrigan, American"

Though Saunders has, among contemporary American authors, committed the largest percentage of his oeuvre to the representation of positive thinking, he rarely places positive thinking's mantras and assurances within the possession of innately positive thinkers like Mae in Eggers's *The Circle*. Instead, in order to showcase the split exploited by positive thinking between material reality and the ideal state of things, Saunders begins with more "negative" characters—those who are depressed, scared, anxious, etc.—and imagines how they might try to imagine positivity or even parrot the positive thinking handed down to them by others. His characters are

largely negative thinkers *trying* to be positive thinkers rather than positive thinkers trying to stay that way. The drama of these stories lies in the gap between the characters' lives and the manner in which they self-reflect—the tragicomic gap between their dreams and the reader's more objective understanding of the characters' narrative realities.

An exception to this treatment of negative characters is the titular protagonist of "Brad Carrigan, American," originally published in *Harper's* in 2005 and collected in Saunders's third short story collection, *In Persuasion Nation* (2006). In this story, Brad Carrigan stars in a reality television show alongside his clueless wife, Doris, their foul-mouthed sock-puppet dog, Buddy, and their neighbor, Chief Wayne.[2] Brad has a difficult time adjusting to the shifting landscape of his and his wife's living space, in which the kitchen grows cornstalks and the yard fills with the undead corpses of a foreign war. Brad's difficulty in the story registers for the other characters as negativity, and he is early on labelled a misanthrope. This attitude eventually leads to his cancellation as a character, an event that lands him in a kind of purgatory one might imagine looks similar to the snowy gray space of one of television's many dead channels. Instead of interrupting his worldview, as Saunders often does in other stories, with self-doubting positive interventions, "Brad Carrigan, American" allows the protagonist's negative—or, for the reader, morally justifiable—evaluations to play out over the course of one of Saunders's longer stories. It is a story that engages seriously with the ethical dilemma not only at work in the act of positive thinking but also in the act of thinking positively in a country that harms not only its own citizens but also has an authoritarian hand in world affairs. Thus it is a story that takes seriously the act of

[2] Critics writing about this story are not in agreement about whether the show Brad's story is set within is "a sitcom" (Cottrell-Boyce 141) or "a 'reality' TV show" (Trussler 211). For the purposes of my essay—and owing to the deliberate ambiguity of Saunders's descriptions—a reality television show's setting seems a more compelling and fitting space for Saunders to explore the possibility of negative thinking as an action requiring agency on the part of the individual, something that a sitcom—with scripted dialogue and action—would necessarily disallow.

negative thinking in a culture that militates against ethical reflection and dissent. The story consistently frames Brad's supposed negativity as a matter of ethics, whether it is voiced at the funeral of their puppet-dog, about the sensationalized violence of a reality television show, or for the victims of a foreign genocide.

I refer to the negative thinking in "Brad Carrigan" and other stories by Saunders as a specifically *ethical* action, because empathy, sympathy, and respect are actions that only ever exist in a Saunders story on the level of the individual. Characters in Saunders's stories are mostly depicted as so oppressed and disenfranchised that negative thinking could never rise to the level of political action. [3] Handed down the language and modes of thought of their workplaces or cultures, expressing negativity tends to come to Saunders's characters with relative difficulty. The protagonist in "Semplica Girl Diaries" is only able to truly think accurately about his station in life while under the influence of alcohol. The protagonist in "Pastoralia" manages a short sentence or two of negative reflection before quickly correcting himself and coaching himself back toward positivity over the length of a full paragraph. The reanimated corpse of Aunt Bernie in "Sea Oak" allows herself to see the world negatively only after going through her mortal life alone and unfulfilled. An extreme case appears in the story "Jon," in which the titular protagonist lives in a youth compound populated by what would today be called social media "influencers," young people paid by corporations to viral market their products. In the story, all the characters housed and paid by the advertising company are fitted with neural chips that make their brains only able to think in the images and language of existing advertisements. So when a friend's child, Baby Amber, dies unexpectedly at the compound, the

[3] One notable exception to this trend in his oeuvre is "Bounty," which actually showcases a form of radical political resistance. In "Bounty," the protagonist falls in with a group trying to resist the story world's racist governmental structure through immediate and violent action. That story even ends with the protagonist opting out of a politically disengaged agrarian utopia in favor of direct political involvement.

only means of dissent available to the inhabitants is "just like thrashing around the place kicking things down, going like, This sucks, this is totally fucked up!" (129).[4]

For all his humor and sentimentality, Saunders's story worlds are often bleak and hopeless, a fact that throws into near-comic relief the dogged attempts at positivity in which many of his characters engage. Although Saunders seems comical in his aforementioned essay about the lack of utility in negative thinking, his stories often recapitulate this paradigm. Characters who do engage in political action inspired by a negative worldview often see their actions rendered ultimately fruitless. For example, the daughter Eva, in "Semplica Girl Diaries," sees her attempts to free the enslaved Semplica Girls to be ultimately in vain, learning that the girls' chain gang-esque microline connecting device will doom them out in the real world. This story-worldly hopelessness sets up narrative holes out of which the stories and their characters cannot escape—worlds so cheerily bleak that negativity is tantamount to obsolescence.[5] Saunders's characters are almost universally lower class, characters whose material conditions render political opposition difficult, if not outright impossible. Further, Saunders illustrates how hegemonic positive thinking puts a stranglehold on opposition such that negativity is all but pointless, but this conclusion means that characters are not allowed to engage with negative thinking any further than an unanswered shouting into the void. Counter to the many studies trying to prove otherwise, Saunders suggests in his stories that negative thinking really might have little or no instrumental value in and of itself, but this lack of utility should not keep individuals from honoring what should be a shared ethical responsibility.

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[4] In "Jon," the negativity associated with mourning the loss of a child is framed explicitly in moral and/or ethical terms. Jon's girlfriend chastises the protagonist for his callous disregard, saying, "Wake up and smell the coffee, you feel bad because a baby died, how about honoring that by continuing to feel bad, which is only natural, because a goddam baby died, you guys?" (130)

[5] Jurrit Daalder writes about Saunders's bleak and hopeless story worlds in his article "Cruel Inventions: George Saunders's Literary Darkenfloxx™" (2017), calling the author's treatment of his characters "cruel" at times.

The notion that the character Brad Carrigan is motivated in his negative thinking by an individual moral and ethical impulse is indicated in the pun generated by his last name, identified by Stephen Burn and Michael Trussler as a phonetic combination of the phrase "care again" (Burn 11; Trussler 211). Trussler argues that "Saunders recognizes that addressing the contemporary requires a consideration of ethical responsibility," describing the writer's ethical impulse as distinctly post-Holocaust (207). In relation to "Brad Carrigan," Trussler writes that "the Holocaust very much influenced the notion that one is ethically required to recognize the suffering of others who are located elsewhere" (212). Burn contradicts Trussler, however, arguing via the pun of Brad's last name that the character's ethical sense is imbued with nostalgia, the pun "care again" indicating "that Brad's morality is a nostalgic desire to return to a past system rather than something new in itself" (11-12). Burn's criticism here is valid, and so is his later claim that the story prefers to "*dramatize*" rather than "*resolve*" the problems it diagnoses (12). Aidan Cottrell-Boyce, however, is more forgiving of the story's almost antiquated notions of ethical responsibility, locating the ethical origins of "Brad Carrigan" within the Lutheran tradition, citing the biblical examples of Job and Abraham and specifically Luther's writings on the *Deus absconditus*, or "the hidden God." The characters in the story also think of Brad's insistent ethical sense as distinctly outdated, even laughably so.

After very briefly mourning the (temporary) death of Buddy the sock-puppet dog—an event used as a "teachable moment" in the vein of the schmaltziest of reality television shows—Doris and Chief Wayne retire to the living room, where they watch a show called *FinalTwist*, a reality television program in which the producers stage a four-part process whereby they inflict

some kind of surprise harm on an unaware group of people.[6] In this specific episode, the producers reveal to a group of friends that not only are their mothers all dead but the friends actually "have just eaten their own grilled mothers" (238). At this last reveal, the "FinalTwist," Doris reacts, "What a riot," to which Brad responds, "'Doris, come on, […] These are real people, people with thoughts and hopes and dreams'" (239). It is clear, however, that the ethical sense Brad tries to represent and honor in the story has no place in the story's world. In response to Brad's rather mild moral condemnation, Doris and Chief Wayne only register a kind of shrug, Chief Wayne responding, "'I don't know that I'm all that interested in the moral ins and outs of it […] I guess I'm just saying I enjoyed it'" (239). Enjoyment and entertainment occupy the center of the story world's moral compass, so much so that they allow individuals to entirely overlook any objective sense of "moral ins and outs."[7] The seemingly unsustainable position of moral ambivalence reflected in the majority of the story's characters is challenged when the Carrigans' backyard morphs to reveal "a vast field of charred human remains" (240). Victims of ethnic genocide, the "Belstonians" appear in the story to both challenge the complacency of Doris and Chief Wayne and showcase Brad's commitment to the ethical consideration of others, even those whose existence is only ever exposed to Americans on news programs. When she recognizes that the Belstonians have upset Brad, Doris advises him to "Give it time […] It'll morph into something more cheerful," suggesting that Brad's sadness toward the suffering of others will be cured by those others' displacement from immediate consciousness (245). Similarly Chief Wayne insists that Brad "accentuate the positive" (245).

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[6] Made-up television shows of a sadistic and violent nature are a staple of Saunders's fiction, most notably in the story "Sea Oak," which features the colorfully named program, *How My Child Died Violently*, as well as the show, *The Worst That Could Happen*.

[7] Burn uses the story's replacement of morals with entertainment as the connective tissue between character Brad and author David Foster Wallace (Burn 9-12).

The negative thinking described in "Brad Carrigan" does not immediately strike one as obviously "negative" as that term is generally understood. There is nothing distinctly pessimistic about Brad's apprehensions. Rather, Brad is the lone voice of reason in the story, and his intrusions into the chaotic stasis of Saunders's story world appear in the form of compassion and even pity—first for Buddy, then for the contestants on the TV show, and finally for the Belstonians. As I have already shown, negative thinking is a slippery term, especially in the hands of proponents of positive thinking, where it can mean anything from pessimism to criticism to everyday sadness. Brad's compassion, however, is uniquely oppositional to the selfishness and greed that characterize the story world he inhabits. In this way, the "negativity" that Doris and Chief Wayne see in Brad's thoughts and actions is essentially Marcusean in the sense that it is only "negative" insofar as it "condemns the established reality" and the positive thinking that keeps it afloat (Marcuse 144). As a consequence, though Brad consistently acts in contradiction to the show's dominant modes of behavior, there is a limit to the scope of his critique, a limit imposed by Saunders's fictionalization of history's end. Brad's little actions and utterances, dismissed as negative, are always immediate and even reactive. Whether he is condemning Doris and Chief Wayne for glossing over Buddy's death or trying to help out the teleported and animated remains of victims of a foreign genocide, Brad is never quite able to articulate his negativity beyond the confines of his immediate conditions. This changes, however, when Brad finds himself in the space between one life and the next.

One of Saunders's signature techniques in relation to narrative endings is the use of ghosts—or post-death protagonists—who resolve the stories with epiphanic moments of reflective, and self-reflexive, insight. In a world of economic precarity, a world in which individuals are not merely told to live in the moment but rather structurally *made* to do so, the

moments proceeding death offer characters the means of reflection prohibited to them in life. "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" ends with the murdered protagonist confessing, "I see the pain I've caused. I see the man I could have been, and the man I was" (*CWL* 22). In "Commcomm," the also recently murdered protagonist looks down at the world after death and realizes, "I was wrong in life, limited, shrank everything down to my size, and yet, in the end, there was something light-craving within me, which sent me back, and saved me" (358). Saunders's ghost endings represent some of the only instances in which the author makes use of the structural technique that Aristotle characterizes in his *Poetics* as anagnorisis, or "a change from ignorance to knowledge" in the protagonist that resolves some of the conflicts that occur throughout the plot (41). In worlds as hostile to its characters as those described in Saunders's stories, it seems unlikely that anything like epiphany might be allowed within them, a point underscored by Gillian Elizabeth Moore. She writes that Saunders's "later work," by which she means those stories collected in *Tenth of December*, "disseminates a kind of epiphanic knowledge, in its attempts to gesture toward discrete selves who can—on occasion—reflect meaningfully on the metaphysical and social truths of their lives, even while his stories affirm the constructed entrapment of self and society" (68). But then, epiphanies as Saunders uses them in his stories are not exactly as grand as what Aristotle describes as "a change from ignorance to knowledge." These are not grand insights that drastically change a character's worldview. Nor are they the Joycean epiphany that Morris Beja describes as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it" (18).

The significance of Saunders's epiphanies is the very act of reflection itself, something afforded to so few of his characters. It is not the content of the revelations but rather the fact of

the revelations in itself that points toward a critique of the internal logic of positive thinking's temporality. As a rule, the eternal present of positive thinking's logic—the idea that we should always keep our minds in the present—militates against acts of reflection. Any reflection within positive thinking is generally shallow and grammatical rather than profound, correcting one's thoughts from negative to positive. However, ghosts offer Saunders an opportunity to break free of the formal and temporal limitations he imposes on himself by telling the stories in present tense. Ending the stories with now-reflective, post-present tense narrators allows them to situate their own narratives within an ethical logic that during life they eschewed. As Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño writes in the introduction to his 2002 novel, *Antwerp*, "ghosts, […] because they're outside of time, are the only ones with time" (ix). For Saunders, too, the exit from neoliberal governmentality's compressed temporality is the only opportunity for working-class people to enjoy a respite from work or thoughts thereof; it is the only opportunity for real considerations of the past—and indeed these scenes generally stick out for their use of the past tense with more frequency than previously in the narrative. We see in these stories' endings a narrativization that does not occur throughout the preceding narrative. In death, with the ability finally to look at life in the past tense, the protagonists are able to make sense of their lives in a manner that was before restricted.

In regard to character development between life and death, "Brad Carrigan" is an exception to the rule of this subsection of Saunders's short stories. If the rule is generally that those positive thinkers who die in the course of the story come around to the merits of negative thinking as a form of realism through the literary technique of epiphany, "Brad Carrigan" is the only story in which this epiphany never occurs. In the character of Brad, Saunders commits his longest consideration of a character allowed narratively to think negatively. Thus the ending

showcases Brad's ethical insistence upon critique as an extension of his character rather than a revelation. As he feels his time slipping by in the purgatory between character assignments, Brad realizes that his final thoughts will dictate the character he will reincarnate as. Knowing this, he thinks, "He must try at least to retain this feeling of pity. If he can, whoever he becomes will inherit this feeling, and be driven to act on it, and will not, as Brad now sees he has done, waste his life on accumulation, trivia, self-protection, and vanity" (273-4). While this ending is sentimental and *almost* uplifting, there is something troubling about the way that Saunders tends to deal with the nature of character development, a staple of fiction, especially in stories that end with ghosts. In these stories the suggestion is that development is not possible in an individual's lifespan. Instead, ethical transformation is only really available to someone after the transcendence of their corporeal selves. In "Brad Carrigan," however, Saunders allows his protagonist more room for development prior to his demise. Upon death, Brad channels his sympathies so that he is reincarnated as someone good, recognizing how he failed to live up to a moral ideal in his previous existence. The traits Brad self-describes here, the way in which he has supposedly "waste[d] his life on accumulation, trivia, self-protection, and vanity," strike the reader as incongruent with the Brad described throughout Saunders's story. Brad's self-criticism here even comes across to the reader as self-flagellation. It has been well documented—in interviews and criticism—that the moral quality of Saunders's fiction often exists at the conjunction of his Catholic upbringing and his adoption of certain Buddhist ideas and practices in his adult life. As he puts it in an interview with W. Brett Wiley for *Image Journal*, "I don't see Christianity and Buddhism as separate; in fact, for me, one picked up where the other left off" (Wiley). It is clear that a convergence of Catholic and Buddhist ideas occurs at the end of "Brad Carrigan," as the protagonist has his final revelation before an off-the-page reincarnation. The

manner in which Brad channels his waning energies outward toward the Belstonians, those "poor things" (274), and the way he almost annihilates the self in his efforts to will away the selfishness he feels characterized his earthly existence has the quality of Buddhism's "erasure of self," as Saunders describes it in his interview with Wiley. It is an effort of redirecting his consciousness outward toward the world rather than inward toward the self. In this description of outward-directed consciousness, Saunders aligns his descriptions of negativity and negative thinking with a contemporary fictional movement that started with David Foster Wallace.

I wrote earlier about the schmaltzy nature of the "teachable moment" Doris and Chief Wayne created out of the death of Buddy, but there is a quality to Saunders's writing—and specifically the ending of "Brad Carrigan"—that is itself almost unbearably schmaltzy to the post-sentimental, postmodern audience for which he writes.[8] This is not, however, a criticism. It is actually something quite new, even if it reminds one of the kind of moral earnestness of literary sentimentalism. There is a quality to Brad's moral sensemaking that recalls Wallace's oft-cited essay, "E Unibus Pluram" (1993). In that essay, often used by critics as a lens through which his fiction can be read, Wallace describes hoped-for future writers who would break away from the kind of irony engendered by postmodernism toward a more sincere approach to writer-to-reader communication.[9] Wallace writes of these "new rebels" that they need to be "willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how *banal*.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama" (81). Saunders is such a

[8] Caleb Crain writes something similar in his review of Saunders's first novel, writing, "There's quite a bit of schmaltz in *Lincoln in the Bardo*."

[9] Adam Kelly's writing on New Sincerity and sincerity as an aesthetic phenomenon within contemporary American literature—and specifically the way in which he describes Wallace as the father of this literary movement—is especially relevant here, and Kelly has in fact written of Saunders's inclusion within this movement in reference to two of his stories. For Kelly's initial theorization of the literary New Sincerity, see Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction" (2010); for his essay on Saunders, see Kelly, "Language Between Lyricism and Corporatism: George Saunders's New Sincerity" (2017).

writer, and his stories very often end with a kind of moralizing principle in a way that risks these "accusations of sentimentality." Though the moral epiphanies that occur at the end of Saunders stories appear similar in form to teachable moments, there is an earned quality about them that separates them from their televisual equivalents. The teachable moment, as it has been mobilized on television, is often not only melodramatic but superficially so. It is a gesture that moralizes and gives the illusion of thought and reflection but which is ultimately empty and thoughtless, an easy technique for trying to engender sympathy in the audience. Saunders tries to revive moralization as a rhetorical strategy in fiction throughout many of his story endings. Though he is risking that the reader will recoil at unrestrained, sincere sentimentality that may come across as outdated, it is clear that he does so to go beyond mere dramatization and toward something like a resolution of the problems his characters face. Indeed, there is an element of his ghost endings that appears as an authorial intrusion, a way for Saunders to step in and try to communicate through his awoken protagonists. He says of his ghost endings, in the interview with Wiley, "when I have a ghost appear, that's a way of objectifying something that's actually rhetorical. We need a certain point of view represented." Saunders's ghosts, then, become story devices mobilized to articulate something like a moral for each story, and the moral shared between all such stories is that the characters should have been less selfish in life. This moral and ethical message only takes negative thinking so far, however, nearly merging it categorically with the depoliticized individualism that positive thinking tries to engender. In the next section, I will look at how Rachel Kushner deals with a similar concept of the characterological development of negativity or negation while keeping it connected to the possibility of politics. While Saunders can only imagine negative thinking in the realm of character development, Kushner applies these concepts to the figures of history and the novel itself.

Bildungsroman, Teleology, and Positive and Negative Dialectics in Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*

Saunders offers many unique and important insights into the experience of neoliberal positive thinking, but he often fails to bridge the gap between the cruel world his characters inhabit and the place for them in that world. Because his vision is so dark, his outlook often pessimistic, the isolation of individualism in a neoliberal world paradoxically circles around to a mode of "resistance" almost equally individualistic. His characters often try to adjust their complicity in the world around them at the expense of having any noticeable effect on that world: instead of trying to change the world, they change themselves. Rachel Kushner pushes against this notion in her second novel, *The Flamethrowers* (2013), writing an anti-individualist novel, a novel structured upon a repudiation of one of fiction's most individualist genres: the *Bildungsroman*. *The Flamethrowers* exposes the coming-of-age novel's structuring individualism, which is often founded upon a complicity with the status quo. Staging the *Bildungsroman*'s appeals to social stability in a historical moment characterized by major political upheaval, Kushner offers a critique of the informing principles of the contemporary period as well, particularly the stagnation of politics under neoliberalism and the attendant "consensus" of capitalism. For Kushner, a political consensus is necessarily static, offering no other telos than that of a flat line. Against the *Bildungsroman*'s characteristic teleology, Kushner offers in its stead a negative dialectic.

The Flamethrowers takes place for the most part in the United States in the 1970s and tells the story of a protagonist known only by the nickname Reno, a name given to her by one-time lover Ronnie Fontaine. Ronnie is a New York artist and best friend of fellow artist Sandro Valera, Reno's principal romantic partner throughout the novel and prodigal heir to the Valera

company, a motorcycle and tire company based in Sandro's home country, Italy. Reno, nicknamed after her city of origin, is an aspiring artist who moves from Nevada to New York so that she can follow her artistic ambitions. On her journey she meets other artists taking residence in New York's burgeoning artistic district following a period of industrial decline and gentrification. As part of an art project, Reno takes a Valera motorcycle to the Utah Salt Flats to participate in the land speed races taking place there. Through a complicated series of events, she sets the land speed record for a woman in one of Valera's vehicles, a feat which gives her the opportunity to tour Italy with the company as a kind of public relations stunt. Here she stays with Sandro at his family villa with his brother and mother. As things begin to heat up at the company, with the striking workers joining forces with the militant Red Brigades, Reno finds herself on the other side of the conflict when she catches Sandro cheating on her with his cousin and joins the family's groundskeeper on a trip to Rome. At the end of the novel, the reader is made to understand that Reno unwittingly becomes an accessory to the murder of Sandro's brother, Roberto, the head of the Valera company. Her involvement in the Red Brigades at the end of the novel has led critic Arthur Redding to include *The Flamethrowers* in his exhaustive compendium of contemporary American novels that feature violent female radicals. In "Darlings of the Weather Underground," Redding argues that novels in this vein use "left-wing women revolutionary fictional characters" as "fantasies that respond in complex ways to a near-universal condition of […] a felt 'helplessness' in the contemporary political arena" (75). *The Flamethrowers* seems different, however, in both its characterization of its central female figure, who presents as a much more static and disengaged character than others Redding lists, as well as in the novel's mostly ambivalent treatment of the themes Redding raises. Far from fantasy,

Kushner's novel is nuanced and dialectical in its cataloguing and fictionalizing of the mid-to-late 20th century's artistic and political thought.

The *Bildungsroman* emerged as a genre to dramatize the individual's navigation of individualization and socialization: or, as Patrizia McBride puts it, the *Bildungsroman* was "charged with portraying the task of self-realization as an individual's coming to terms with the order of the world and finding his proper place in it" (235). The traditional *Bildungsroman*, as Gregory Castle points out, generally saw the individual adjust himself to the social world into which he matured rather than have any substantial effect on it. Castle writes that the classical *Bildungsroman* "demanded stability and predictable development" (*Reading*, 24). Kushner pays homage to the tradition while adapting it for the 21st century. Extending the political passivity of the traditional *Bildungsheld* to broader and more total character traits, Kushner writes Reno as a character who not only openly identifies with a passive attitude but indulges it. The reader is supposed to see Reno's behavior in the novel as a sort of fly on the wall of her own life. She moves around the world metaphorically and geographically with the relative ease of a traditional *Bildungsroman* protagonist, but she very seldom has any actual effect on that world. Though Reno's *Bildung* in the novel does not see this stance radically change, as a mode of (non)action it is implicitly challenged and critiqued in the novel. Reno does not change from passive to revolutionary, but her complicity with the world as it is rings hollow thrown against the historical backdrop of 1970s radical political negativity—retrospectively, the years leading up to the neoliberal turn in politics.[10]

[10] Andrew Strombeck makes a convincing argument for reading *The Flamethrowers* as a kind of pre-history of the neoliberal turn in politics, citing David Harvey's analysis of "the mid-seventies New York fiscal crisis" as a proverbial testing ground for "the neoliberal policies of privatization that would come to dominate the United States and globe in the coming decades" ("The Post-Fordist Motorcycle," 450).

In *Negative Dialectics*, the 1966 book that would also be his last, Adorno starts at the outset with the intent to "free dialectics from […] affirmative traits" (xix). The object of his ire is what he reads as an embedded positivity in the traditional philosophical theorization of the dialectic. Though he focuses in his book mostly on a critique of Hegelian dialectics, Adorno argues that, "As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of a 'negation of negation' later became the succinct term" (xix). "Dialectics serves the end of reconcilement," he later summarizes (6). Hegelian scholar Terry Pinkard, elucidating Adorno's thought, writes that Adorno's object of critique is the "affirmative" turn within Hegelian dialectics that describes as necessary those past events that led to the present—the explanation of "why that shape of accounts was necessary" (6).[11] From Adorno's perspective, this reflective sensemaking makes necessary what must be contingent. Pinkard writes that "the system closes itself off […] whereas Adorno thinks that any dialectic that took its own 'negative' activity seriously would have to be open, not closed" (6). As Adorno writes, "dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction" (11). Holloway et al. describe Adorno's dialectics as a "thinking-against-the-wrong-world, a thinking that would no longer make sense if we were outside the prison of the wrong world—but we are not" (6). A negative dialectic maintains the

[11] The notion that Adorno's dialectic targets a utopian teleology at the heart of Hegelian dialectics has become somewhat of a battleground not only for scholars writing against Adorno but also within secondary accounts of Adorno's work. Take these very contradictory evaluations of Adorno's relationship to Hegel's work, for example, captured in two texts meant to introduce Adorno's thought. In Gillian Rose's *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (1978), Rose writes, "Thus to deny the possibility of reconcilement of subject and object in history and to charge Hegel with transmuting the 'negation of the negation' into an acceptance of the *status quo*, are intelligible but simple and unoriginal criticisms of Hegel's philosophy" (77). Susan Buck-Morss writes in *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (1977), "In rejecting the concept of history as progress and in insisting on the nonidentity of reason and reality, it [Adorno's philosophical project] broke decisively from Hegel" (xiii). Rose sees Adorno's alternative concept of the dialectic and its critique of Hegelian's own as a misunderstanding and/or simplification of Hegel's work, whereas Buck-Morss seems to think that Adorno's dialectic clearly engages intellectually with Hegel's work and finds it wanting.

generic logical structure of the previously conceived form of dialectics, but it does so without any kind of teleological frame. *The Flamethrowers* engages with the form of the dialectic, and I argue that it mirrors best Adorno's mode of thinking due to the novel's lack of faith in teleology.

The Flamethrowers instances Adorno's theory of an aesthetic of negativity in the way that it is constructed dialectically—oscillating from the stasis of concrete reality to its antithesis or negation—to conclude in a synthesis ambiguous in its ultimate meaning. The novel not only adopts the dialectical form, but more specifically it mobilizes what Adorno refers to as a negative dialectic—a temporal construct that eschews whatever utopian end the dialectic had previously assumed. In so doing, the novel catalogues and presents contradictions not only at the heart of capitalism and its late-century form, neoliberalism, but also those which exist within the traditionally individual-centric novel form, the *Bildungsroman*. Andreas Gailus argues that the narrative progression of the traditional *Bildungsroman* is organized not only by teleology, but also by the system of identification contained within Hegelian dialectics (*Passions,* 19). As Gailus puts it, "If the *Phenomenology* narrates the history of Spirit's self-realization, the bildungsroman emplots the life of the individual as a developmental story that culminates in the protagonist's understanding of the unconscious forces and self-deceptions that have shaped his life from the beginning" (19). The generic narrative structure of a *Bildungsroman* is in this formulation a progress from ignorance to enlightenment, a carryover from the genre's historical beginnings within Germany's Enlightenment movement (McBride 234). "As in Hegel," Gailus continues, "the contingent and accidental are integrated into a narrative that recasts them in the modality of the necessary" (*Passions,* 19). That is, what appear at first as random occurrences and decisions become in the teleology of the *Bildungsroman* "inevitable steps toward full self-realization" (19). If, as Castle argues, "the Hegelian concepts of negation and alienation

contribute to the successful practice of *Bildung*" ("Coming of Age," 359), Kushner recapitulates this claim and places especially the concept of negation at the forefront of her adaptation of this longstanding literary genre, while disposing of the positive teleology Adorno identifies in Hegel's formulation.

Teleology is a major dimension through which Kushner disrupts the positive conception of dialectics as described by Adorno. By teleology I refer to two distinct yet interrelated ideas, or rather two temporal perspectives. There is the view from above, wherein the present is used as a causal justification for the past. This is how I would describe Adorno's criticism of Hegel. The other view of teleology is from below, wherein an action in the present points toward an intrinsic future outcome. This kind of teleology I find difficult to identify in anything other than literature, where generic and narrative logics set up certain expectations.[12] But whereas *The Flamethrowers* does *go* many places, from New York City to the Salt Flats of Utah to Italy, the plot development—in the sense that one would traditionally conceive of plot in a *Bildungsroman*—is rather sparse. Kushner sets up several developmental arcs that ultimately come to nothing, or rather, they do not achieve any kind of satisfying conclusion, and they do not follow what might be considered a teleological arc. Early in the novel, Reno sets off for the Salt Flats so that she can create an art project. This plot thread goes nowhere, however, and the plot is then taken forward to Italy with the new opportunity presented to Reno by the Valera team. And though Reno does go to Italy for the purpose of touring with Valera, the escalation of workers' strikes in Italy generally and against Valera specifically drive the company to cancel the tour. At the end of the novel, while Reno awaits the arrival of a Red Brigades member who may have murdered Sandro's brother, she considers the concept of teleology as it pertains to this specific scenario.

[12] A representative example of this would be Chekhov's gun, an object that has embedded in its narrative representation the expectation of its eventual discharge.

She thinks of a woman in a film sitting at a bar with hair curlers in her hair, waiting "[f]or a man to pick her up, buy her a beer, take her somewhere. The curlers that meant some occasion to come, not yet named" (383). In other words, the curlers in this scenario denote narratological teleology: that is, the curlers are a means to an imminent and immanent end. Reno, however, "wasn't in that kind of time, curler time" (383). Instead her waiting, as for the famous Godot, has no such immanent closure. The last passages in the novel change tenses seamlessly from past to present, as we realize that the past tense of the novel's events cross over into the present narration. We are told, "You can think and think a question, the purpose of waiting, the question of whether there is any purpose, any *person* meant to appear, but if the person doesn't come, there is no one and nothing to answer you" (383). The novel ends without the person's arrival, without any such conclusion or teleological "purpose." The reader, like Reno, is left without any kind of resolution. Just as with so many other plot threads in the novel, which establish and then flout narrative expectations, the loose ends of this final plot thread are left untied.

There is thus a jarring quality to the political content in *The Flamethrowers*. Those portions of the novel that feature political moments and movements contradict in content and tone the more central story of Reno's coming of age so much that the two halves often feel like two entirely separate stories. The aesthetic and formal representations of political upheaval in the novel take the form of various *intrusions* into the formally static space of Reno's coming of age. Scenes of rebellion in the novel represent on the level of form exactly what rebellion should represent: an intervention, a disruption. Further, the action encapsulated and represented in scenes of rebellion act as foils for Reno's otherwise passive behavior. The novel itself negates the comfortable position normally afforded to the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman,* a character who is generally conceived as the optimistically free, liberal subject dreamt up in modern

culture.[13] Rather than acting, as a liberal subject is meant to do, Reno is acted upon. She is, in the words of Reno's primary lover in the novel, Sandro, "a conduit" (30). Further, however, Sandro says this of all "young women": "A young woman is a conduit. All she has to do is *exist*" (30). And for much of the novel, this is all Reno does. She is there, and people act upon her. Reno interprets Sandro's generalization here as follows: "You have time. Meaning don't use it, but pass through time in patience, waiting for something to come. Prepare for its arrival. Don't rush to meet it. Be a conduit. I believed him. I felt this to be true. Some people might consider that passivity but I did not. I considered it living" (30).

The passivity of Reno's narrative is challenged in those scenes—especially toward the end of the novel—in which radical demonstrations take place. Though it would not be obvious to anyone that the passivity that characterizes Reno for much of the story is qualitatively similar to positive thinking, it is clear in her interpretation of Sandro's description of a conduit that passivity and positive thinking are closely aligned in form. In dialectical terms, positive thinking is an eternal identification with the first step in the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad. Positive thinking sees the world as it is, the thesis, and wishes to go no further. Negation, if it is allowed to occur, represents the second step in this process. In *The Flamethrowers*, much of the novel's narrative space is occupied by pure thesis. Reno feels her way around the art world of New York City, navigating an artistic space made possible by industrial decline and urban renewal, but in the immediate experience of the narrative this process is felt as stasis. The transition from Fordism to what will later be called *neoliberalism* is not experienced by these upper-middle-class characters as anything like rupture. The rupture is felt elsewhere, and as the novel moves to its end, Reno comes to experience it. In an essay for *The Paris Review* about the novel, Kushner

[13] Andreas Gailus identifies the *Bildungsheld* with a liberal conception of subjectivity, writing that "the discourse of *Bildung*" had connections "to emergent contemporary liberalist theories of the market" ("Forms," 147).

writes of the Italian revolutionaries in the 1970s Autonomist movement that their goal was "to build forms of togetherness in a country whose working class was impotent and whose sub-working class was fed up with work, by turns joyous and full of rage, ready to revolt, which they did." This impulse fits neatly with the conception of negative dialectics as Adorno theorizes it. Alberto R. Bonnet writes of Adorno's form of dialectics that it "remains anchored in a negativity that points towards the antagonistic character of social relations" (68).

Kushner's description of a negative politics also serves to align the Autonomists with a much more contemporary political movement, one which was rather fresh at the time Kushner was writing *The Flamethrowers*. Though *The Flamethrowers* is a historical novel about a very specific point in time in both the United States and Italy, it also reflects, as a novel *written* in a specific time, the ideas of negation in the present-day moment. Lee Konstantinou closes his book on postirony in contemporary American fiction by describing *The Flamethrowers* as a "postironic Bildungsroman," a genre that "figures postirony as the end of a process of either individual or collective political maturation" (*Cool Characters* 275). Kushner's novel in particular "invoke[s] Occupy," describing the process by which someone can "become something like an occupier," a process that, according to Konstantinou, includes "travers[ing] from a state of political naïvety through a phase of cynicism or postmodern irony, arriving finally at a state of postironic political commitment" (275). The Occupy movement is the closest contemporary US correlate to the Autonomist movement in 70s Italy, and Kushner has been asked about Occupy's influence on the novel in several interviews. Speaking to the *New Orleans Review*, Kushner claimed that "Those in Occupy were not making a specific set of demands. They weren't asking for health benefits and better minimum wages as baristas or whatever. It was, and I hope remains, a kind of rejection and a refusal, rather than a demand for a specific and

better-negotiated position in the service economy" (quoted in Martin). For Kushner, negation first and foremost describes the quality of Occupy's specific brand of protest, because any epoch-changing political movement sets itself antagonistically against the world as it is. Kushner's comments here open up the question of praxis, a topic explored in detail in her novelization of historical political movements in the United States and Italy.

Between the New York art scene and the Italian Autonomist movement, Kushner explores not only the different forms of protest in different countries but also the forms of protest available to artistic media. It is in the United States, and New York City especially, where the lines between negative thinking and art become most blurred. One peripheral character, Henri-Jean, goes around art exhibitions holding "a long pole over his shoulder, painted with barber stripes" (47). A friend of Reno's, Giddle, comments on this performance artist's odd display, "No sellable works, just disruption" (48). Early in the novel, Reno gets involved with the Valera racing team after crashing her own motorcycle on the Salt Flats. The team is there to break the land speed record, but work is interrupted when the team receives news that their counterparts in Italy have declared a strike. Because they are all union workers, they join their comrades in what is called a "work-to-rule strike," what Tonino—the team leader on-site—refers to as "a way of striking without striking" (118). Instead, the workers must conduct all their work "absolutely by union and company code on every single procedural element of their jobs," meaning that the work is done but in a manner that takes much longer than it otherwise would (118). This performance is rather short-lived, ending the next day but continuing in the form of a slowdown, which Reno describes as follows: "The mechanics no longer followed the rule book so perversely and exactly but instead distended time, taking longer to perform each task, and punctuating their activities and communications with great pauses" (122). The most extended

example of this motif in the novel—the act of rebellion as a performance—is in Kushner's fictionalized depiction of the historical protest group, Up Against the Wall Motherfucker (or "The Motherfuckers"). The principal member of the group in the novel is Burdmoore Model. Burdmoore's ex-girlfriend, Gloria, describes the Motherfuckers as "a political street gang. Late sixties. They went around pretending to assassinate people with toy guns […] Eventually they put away the toy guns and stabbed a landlord" (153). She comments that their "actions were interesting, in the context of the dreadful hippies of that era. The Motherfuckers were about anger and drugs and sex, and what a relief that was, Gloria said, compared to the love-everyone tyranny of the hippies" (154). Against the optimism of the hippie movement, then, the Motherfuckers represented a force of pure pessimism, pure negation. If that was a tenable model for the artistic and political hybrid movement in the 1960s, however, such gesturing is entirely emptied of content in the present tense of the novel. Instead of art as an overt expression of politics, such that the expression itself subordinates the art, in the New York City of the 1970s art is explicitly depoliticized, mere form devoid of content. One example of this is the performance artist known in the novel only as "the White Lady," who roams the streets of New York "not always in white, only sometimes, and always at night. A white wig. White makeup. White cotton gloves" (146). Strombeck describes the novel's 1970s performance art as "disturbingly apolitical" (662). According to Burdmoore, by contrast, his group's performances had been "theater. Real theater. Like Brecht" (171).

In one particular scene, the differences between New York and Italy are explored in the context of art, specifically graffiti. Reno has just arrived in San Lorenzo, the hotbed of the workers' movement and specifically of the Red Brigades, a group into which Reno has unwittingly inserted herself. She notices that "graffiti [was] on every building," observing that

the graffiti here, in contrast to that found in New York, "was all urgent and angry messages, or ones with a kind of dull malaise, as if the exterior of the buildings were the walls of a prison" (271). Among the various messages written are: "*They throw us in jail and call it freedom*"; "*When shit becomes a commodity the poor will be born without asses*"; the question, "*What do we want?*" followed by the response, "*Everything*" (271). In contrast, "New York graffiti was not desperate communication. It was an exuberance of style, logo, name, the feat of installing jazzy pseudonyms, a burst of swirled color where the commuter had not thought possible" (272). In other words, graffiti in San Lorenzo is about content—a message—and graffiti in New York is all about form, emptied of content. Debates about art's political role are juxtaposed in the novel with the more overtly political domain of radical protest.

There is a subsection of radical characters in *The Flamethrowers* for whom theory must be subordinated to action. The first group to which the reader is introduced in this vein is the Italian Futurists of the 1910s, a group T. P. Valera, father of Sandro Valera, stumbles upon early in the novel while at university. Kushner breaks down the fictional Futurists' governing philosophies in a fairly short passage that captures the movement's negative political frame: "They were smashing and crushing every outmoded and traditional idea, Lonzi said, every past thing. Everything old and of good taste, every kind of decadentism and aestheticism. They aimed to destroy czars, popes, kings, professors, 'gouty homebodies,' as Lonzi put it, all official culture and its pimps, hawkers, and whores" (74). There is a certain non-specificity to Kushner's treatment of the negative political forces depicted in the novel, enough so that Reno is able to draw a kind of connective line between the early-20th century Futurists and the later Autonomists, bringing them all within the central metaphor, *flamethrowers*. The novel explores and engages with various forms of negativity, all of which float around the central motif of the

flamethrower. In the midst of the protests in Italy are people equipped with Molotov cocktails, objects now ubiquitous in their signification of political riots. In the context of the novel's themes, those people tossing these "firebombs," as Kushner calls them at one point, are literally *flame throwers* (281). Commenting on the figure of the flame-trooper in the Italian army in World War I, Reno describes them metaphorically as "pure offense, overrunning enemy lines" (360). "The flamethrower was never, ever defensive," Reno adds (360). Though the Futurists are depicted as crushing all existing forms—and therefore inherently negative—their orientation is toward "progress […] which is always right" (77). The Autonomists, however, are responding in the novel to the world the Futurists tried to create. Autonomists are rebelling against their treatment in factories whose techno-utopian orientation is an inheritance from Futurism's impact on manufacturing and the economy. Kushner brings these antagonistic political projects together under the umbrella of negative politics to point toward a concept of history centered on the power of negation and the impact that direct political engagement has on the course of history. It is represented as dialectical in Kushner's account, a historical process in which the Futurists' negation led to the form of industrial capitalism that the Autonomists then negate.

This meta-historical analysis stands in stark contrast to the conception of *Bildung* that privileges the individual's conformity to the world as it is, which is on display in most of the novel's depictions of Reno as someone essentially "along for the ride." There is a quality to the negativity in the novel that makes it a bit like background noise for the central characters. That is, for most of the story, negative political thought and action are occurring behind the main events, and it is not until the very end of the novel that negation has anything like an actual effect on the plot of the novel. Take, for instance, the passage when Reno has just arrived in Italy with Sandro at his family's villa. Reno's introduction to Roberto, Sandro's brother and the man in

charge of the Valera company, is curt. Sandro explains that "Roberto was in a tough position. There was massive upheaval at the Valera plants and though Roberto had worked out deals with the trade union, the workers were now rejecting their own union and striking anyway" (219). Reno thinks to herself, "Good for them […] and anyway it didn't excuse his brother from being rude" (219). Removed from the fray as the couple is at Sandro's family villa, Reno—and the reader—is only exposed to the strikes through the mediated simplicity of the phrase *massive upheaval*. What this means is rather opaque at this point in the story, and this phrase is made to stand in for what is a tumultuous environment, the buildup to what will become the climax of the novel, but most of this buildup is lost on Reno and by extension the reader as well. Reno even analyzes retrospectively her former belief that the political action that was going on around her had very little to do with her.[14] Looking back on her feelings around the time that Sandro's family was dealing with the workers' strike, Reno reflects, "I didn't much care, and I never would have guessed that any of the bad news would have an impact on me" (249). The novel attempts to upset this class-based disinvestment in politics. For much of the novel, Reno's impression that politics—or "bad news" in the context of this particular scene—have no impact on her is more or less supported. Work stoppage and slowdown at the Salt Flats, for instance, have absolutely no impact on Reno.

Contradictions abound in the novel, and it is this quality more than any that gives *The Flamethrowers* its dialectical texture. As Adorno writes of his negative dialectic, "To proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions" (145). Though Kushner offers up several forms of historical political protest in both the United States and Italy, the novel's depictions and

[14] In that way, the novel's closest literary precursor is probably Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education* (1869), a *Bildungsroman* that features a protagonist so engrossed in his romantic pursuits that he misses the significance of the historical events through which he is living.

descriptions of political action rarely moralize to the point of romanticism. That is, while the Motherfuckers seem nostalgically like a worthy alternative to the apolitical nature of the art practiced in Reno's time, and the action in Italy appears favorable to the inaction in New York, Kushner is careful to point out the flaws in all camps.[15] The Motherfuckers were a radical, leftist performance group that had an intensely antagonistic relationship to women. The Red Brigades, as depicted in the novel, also have a misogynistic streak. Reno is ostensibly a free liberal subject taken through space and time in the novel by and for men. She is the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman* who sees very little growth and has a minor impact on the world around her. The static world that she occupies is everywhere surrounded by the tumult of change and immanent possibility. It can be frustrating to read the book for any kind of explicit message—differentiating it significantly from much of Saunders's oeuvre—but *The Flamethrowers* finds its unique tone and approach exactly in its refusal to fulfill pre-existing forms. Much like the political demonstrations that populate the novel itself, Kushner's narrative propels itself forward with a negative dialectic. Pinkard summarizes Adorno's conception of dialectical thought in much the same way that it is represented in *The Flamethrowers*: "All modes of thinking are constrained by the thinker's past, the thinkers are absorbed in the requirements of thought in their day, and they project themselves into a future that will stand in contrast to them (as their 'negation')" (10). Kushner conceives of history, then, in similar terms to those put forward by John Holloway et al. in their defense of negative dialectics: "History is seen not as a series of

[15] Kushner's representation of historical thought and its utility in the present closely aligns with Melinda Cooper's opening argument in *Family Values*. Cooper argues that the nostalgic Left romanticizes Fordism at the expense of overlooking the manner in which that configuration of capitalism was founded upon a deeply embedded sexism (7-24). *The Flamethrowers* refuses nostalgia for past forms of protest by cataloguing the flawed foundations upon which those groups were built.

stages, but as the movement of endless revolt" (7). If the negative dialectic is a "movement of endless revolt," positive thinking is then by contrast the non-movement of endless stasis.

Throughout most of the novel, Reno thinks of her life one-dimensionally, her traversal through history as straight as the line she tries to imprint on the Utah Salt Flats with the wheels of her motorcycle, unerring and unperturbed by politics and struggle. Just as air resistance and the uneven ground conspire to throw her from her motorcycle, so too do the historically constituting forces of negative politics change Reno's course. *The Flamethrowers* chews up the *Bildungsroman*'s conception of a protagonist who carves her own path in life largely unencumbered by politics and spits out a narrative of life lived in the throws of historical change. Yet while Kushner foregrounds the world-historical importance of a politics centered on negation, she does little to broaden the scope of negative thinking's availability from the kind of privileged, white individual that Saunders also describes in "Brad Carrigan, American." In the next section, I will propose that Colson Whitehead offers a more racialized analysis of negative thinking, one which takes into account the availability of absolute refusal to a group of people who have been absolutely refused by their own country.

The Post-Apocalypse, or, Life after the End of History: Negating Positive Narrative in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

Colson Whitehead's fifth novel, *Zone One* (2011), is a story about storytelling itself: on the level of the individual, on the level of the nation, and within the genre confines of the post-apocalyptic zombie narrative. On the level of the individual, *Zone One* examines the ways in which we tell stories with structural consistencies that betray our desires for therapeutic redemption. On the level of the nation, the novel satirizes national mythmaking and the manner in which nations—

especially the United States—use the power of narrative to govern their citizens. And within the domain of generic expectations, Whitehead intervenes in a genre that ostensibly describes humanity's worst fears—for example the end of humanity itself—while nevertheless maintaining a commitment to a positive telos. If, as Joan Didion famously observed, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Whitehead suggests in his zombie novel that this desire for life reflexively inflects the very narratives we construct (Didion 11). *Zone One* dramatizes the optimistic impulse encapsulated in the act of narration and struggles against this impulse. If narrative is conceived of as life-giving, Whitehead mobilizes a fictional monster all too capable of bringing life to an end. Whitehead is skeptical toward American cultural self-narration, inflected as it is by a strong history of positive thinking, capitalism, and racism; the alternative he proffers could be said to align—as in *The Flamethrowers*—with Theodor Adorno's conception of a negative dialectic. Similar to Kushner, Whitehead points his authorial finger at the ideological consensus of capitalism as a force that stagnates political creativity. The novel is then inflected by the cultural conditions described by Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*, in which he argues that capitalism has stunted political imagination and created a "one-dimensional society" founded upon adherence to a positive identification with the dominant political structures. Whereas Kushner depicts the telos of capitalist realism as a flat line, however, Whitehead dramatizes in *Zone One* the manner in which the continuation of old political forms evidences a flatlining of the political imaginary. His novel is thus structured upon a negation of neoliberal time.[16]

[16] Marco Caracciolo also writes of the novel's aesthetic negation, but he does so in the context of world-building, arguing that the novel—in line with the post-apocalyptic genre more generally—creates the post-apocalypse by way of negating aspects of the pre-apocalypse, writing, "narrative world-making is triggered by events that destabilize the status quo of a world, and are therefore surprising and highly tellable" (223).

Probably more than any piece of fiction featured in this thesis, *Zone One* comically exposes the fear and anxiety that positive thinking has been set the task of structurally masking, but the novel also illustrates the way in which this fear sits at the very heart of positive thinking itself. The post-apocalyptic genre, as a sort of index of contemporary fears and desires, analogizes the structural complexities of positive thinking in a very intuitive way. Positive thinking necessarily springs forth as a response to some form of widespread cultural fear. Otherwise there would be nothing about which we would need to train ourselves to think positively, and yet it is this fear that we are meant—via positive thinking—to ultimately suppress. Just as positive thinking cannot exist without the animating fear that it is meant to repress, the post-apocalyptic genre of fiction cannot exist without the presupposition of culture-wide anxieties. In her reading of *Zone One*, Erica Sollazzo notes that fictions within the post-apocalyptic genre "tend to reflect the most pervasive cultural anxieties of the day" (458).[17] Jason Heller, in an article for *NPR* on the rise in popularity of post-apocalyptic fiction, also explains the popularity of the genre by its enactment of cultural anxieties. Heller writes, "Post-apocalyptic books are thriving for a simple reason: The world feels more precariously perched on the lip of the abyss than ever, and facing those fears through fiction helps us deal with it." While I agree that the rise in number of post-apocalyptic fictions in the past 20 years attests to a shared cultural anxiety, there seems to be an element of anticipation or even desire expressed in the ad nauseam

[17] *Zone One* has seen an exceptional level of critical engagement for such a recent novel, some of which will not be explicitly featured here. Several critics have written about the novel's critique of post-racial politics. Ramon Saldivar argues that Whitehead, along with other contemporary minority writers, have adopted a "postrace aesthetic" to address the issue of race in a new manner. Grace Heneks argues that Whitehead adopts an ironic stance in *Zone One* toward the contemporary consensus that American culture has become postracial. Jessica Hurley uses the zombie as a central metaphor for the neoliberal postracialization of race politics in the United States. Christian B. Long writes a fascinating account of the importance of infrastructural security to the process of nation rebuilding in post-apocalyptic narratives, especially *Zone One*.

repetition of simulated annihilation.[18] The disaster film, as a sub-genre of post-apocalyptic fiction—a category of film that includes *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), *2012* (2009), and *San Andreas* (2015) among countless others—best exemplifies this fulfillment-drive behind witnessing apocalypse. These films, which depict natural disasters that wipe out whole swathes of the population and disrupt governmental processes, belong firmly in the genre of the action film, a genre not generally known for a melancholic attitude. Instead these films are rife with computer-generated simulations of destruction on grand scales, all relatively similar in the kinds of set-pieces they showcase: the ground opening up from a massive earthquake, colossal buildings collapsing in physically accurate and satisfying fashion, biblical tsunamis swallowing metropolitan areas and leaving them permanently under water. These scenes, though harrowing, are also deeply cathartic; they express a desire in modern culture to bear witness to the end of everything as it currently is so as to imagine a point at which we might start anew.

One might even look at the fulfillment-drive behind post-apocalyptic fiction and see it as a natural response to what Mark Fisher calls "capitalist realism," or the melancholic consensus felt mostly on the left that "[c]apitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (Fisher 8). Leif Sorensen argues that *Zone One* "captures the tension between a widespread sense of crisis and the equally pervasive influence of futurism, which figures crises as moments of possibility" (560).[19] The post-apocalyptic desire is portrayed in the novel via the treatment of

[18] Heller continues in the last paragraph of his article to argue, "By imagining what it's like to lose everything, we can value what we have." Though this oddly therapeutic dimension to both the reader/viewer reception and even the narrative construction of many of the more popular post-apocalyptic fictions is certainly evident, Heller's seeming internalization of this dimension betrays a strange complicity. Indeed this last line reads as a bit of positive thinking, a literal enactment of Mark Fisher's fear that a disaster film with the simplicity of Disney's *WALL-E* (2008) "performs our anti-capitalism for us," allowing us to decide ultimately that the world as it is is good enough (Fisher 12).

[19] Sorensen's claim that "futurism […] figures crises as moments of possibility" is not directly connected by him to the machinations of neoliberal governance, but the exploitation of crises by neoliberalism is an idea argued by prominent critics on the left, such as Naomi Klein and Philip Mirowski. Klein writes in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) about the ways in which neoliberal policies have been enacted upon vulnerable populations in both developed and

positive thinking—as it is captured in the slogans and schemes of the resurgent interim governing body, the American Phoenix. Though one would hardly expect that positive thinking could survive the apocalypse, Whitehead uses capitalist realism and its imagination of life *after* "the end of history" as a structuring principle in the novel. Furthering Fisher's claims about the stagnation of the political imagination after the Cold War, Whitehead extends this insight into imaginary post-apocalyptic time, in which the continuation of—rather than return to—old forms symbolizes the real-world flatlining of political thought. As the protagonist Mark Spitz remarks about the post-apocalyptic world of the novel, "history had come to an end" (58). In *Zone One*, the positive face of neoliberalism is revealed as a cover for the stagnation and decline of the Western political imagination, and this stagnation-as-decline is reflected in the narrative structure of the novel. At the end of history, the introduction of new forms of thought is replaced with a repackaging of the already existing forms.

Markers of positive thinking proliferate in *Zone One*, especially in the hands of "The American Phoenix." Whitehead writes the American Phoenix similarly to how DeWitt writes Joe in *Lightning Rods*. With every problem that arises in the wake of the apocalypse, the American Phoenix rebrands it with the alacrity of Joe's can-do optimistic verve. With their stranglehold on official statistics and messaging, the American Phoenix resembles the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, using what the narrator refers to as "the new language" to twist coverage of the latest news (98). In *Zone One*, the new language is essentially old language now officially sanctioned by the resurgent capitalist government: it is nothing more or less than positive thinking. In a moment of relative respite, about a third of the way into the novel, the narrator describes the American Phoenix's approach to public relations:

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developing nations in the midst of national crises. Mirowski identifies in *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* (2013) the rise and perseverance of neoliberalism despite and because of the self-made financial crisis of 2008.

> Early in the reboot, Buffalo agreed on the wisdom of rebranding survival. They maintained a freakish menagerie of specialists up there, superior brains yanked from the camps, and what did these folks do all day but try and think up better ways to hone the future, tossing ideograms up on the whiteboards and conferring at their self-segregated tables in the sublevel cafeteria, lowering their voices when outsiders walked by balancing orange trays. Some of them were hard at work crafting the new language, and they came up with more than a few winners; the enemy they faced would not succumb to psychological warfare, but that didn't mean that the principles needed to remain unutilized. (98-9)

Though the narrator jokes that "the enemy they faced would not succumb to psychological warfare," referring of course to the discourse-averse zombie hordes, I would argue that the enemy the American Phoenix is truly targeting here are the downtrodden souls of the interim government's subjects. The American Phoenix is none other than a government-run public relations committee, and the tools of their trade are the principles of positive thinking from the pre-apocalyptic world. Sorensen observes that the American Phoenix instantiates "technocratic, neoliberal governance, in which elite think tanks generate models that then produce futures for the public" (564). He explains away the American Phoenix's official language of canned optimism as an outcome of the unevenly divided risk inherent to risk societies. As he puts it, the "source of the tension between the optimistic pronouncements of the American Phoenix and Mark Spitz's disillusionment is the difference in their proximity to zombies" (564). Essentially, in *Zone One*, the precarious (survivors) are governed by the safe (those in Buffalo).

While I agree that this model of unevenly distributed precarity is evident in the novel and a carryover from pre-apocalyptic society, it seems to me that the American Phoenix's positivity

campaign—much like positive thinking in the real world—is more than simply an *effect*: it is a deliberate operation of neoliberal governance. Their campaign is designed to push their subjects forward, and in doing so it manages to push the novel's own plot forward. By the American Phoenix's account, as well as the survivors upon whom their rhetoric has taken hold, the apocalypse through which they are all living is essentially a liminal space, a place of transition from one reality to the next, an "interregnum" in their own words. Early in the novel Mark Spitz reflects on the new government's reinstatement of private property rights, making sense of this development in the language of the American Phoenix. "There had been laws once," the narrator begins, "to abide by their faint murmuring, despite the interregnum, was to believe in their return. To believe in reconstruction" (48). The use of words like *interregnum* and *reconstruction* is deliberate.

Interregnum is a term briefly described by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. For Gramsci, the early 20th century was suffering from a "crisis of authority," in which the ruling class was still "dominant" but had "lost its consensus" (275-6). This crisis of authority opened up a kind of ideological vacuum, which Gramsci refers to as an "interregnum." He writes, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (276). In *Zone One*, this interregnum is, in Andrew Strombeck's words, "between a currently zombie-ridden world and a future world that looks similar to the pre-plague one" (263). Reflecting on the American Phoenix's public relations approach to government, Mark Spitz remarks, "it was almost as if the culture was picking up where it left off" (99). Moving toward "the new" requires, from the American Phoenix's point of view, a reconstruction, a weighty term in the novel. Out of the wreckage, building a new society does not involve creation or construction but rather *re*-construction, a

term not only suggesting a rebuilding of what was lost but also gesturing toward a particular era of American history.

The post-Civil War era (1865-1877) was characterized by a radical transformation of former Confederate state governments, entailing a mass unseating of Confederate politicians and the instatement of a number of former slaves to positions of state office. Reconstruction was a national governmental effort not only to end slavery but to essentially change the Southern way of life. This effort was, however, largely unsuccessful; as W. E. B. Du Bois puts it in his lengthy book on the subject, Reconstruction "was in a certain sense all a failure, but a splendid failure" (708). Reconstruction was a utopian attempt at correcting what the South had gotten dreadfully wrong in the time leading up to and including the Civil War, but upon its sudden end with the Compromise of 1877 much of the South was rebuilt according to the old way of life, most states instituting Jim Crow laws that saw freedmen returned to new forms of bondage. Du Bois concludes that "If the Reconstruction of the Southern states, from slavery to free labor, and from aristocracy to industrial democracy, had been conceived as a major national program of America, whose accomplishment at any price was well worth the effort, we should be living today in a different world" (708). Whitehead performs a double entendre in using *reconstruction* and *interregnum* synonymously and in using these terms to describe the American Phoenix's rebuilding efforts. On one hand his early association of the American Phoenix with the post-Civil War Reconstruction foreshadows the failure of the American Phoenix's own interregnum. It also necessarily indicts the Reconstruction as a failed interregnum, which—upon learning that Mark Spitz is black very late into the novel—aligns the novel's pessimistic stance with the school of African American thought known as Afro-pessimism.

Afro-pessimism grew out of Orlando Patterson's influential book *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), in which Patterson argued that the African American slave was best described as essentially an object, a "social nonperson" defined by the manner in which he or she "ceased to belong […] to any legitimate social order" (5). Scholars in the Afro-pessimist school have extended Patterson's analysis to describe post-slavery black life as a continuation of rather than a departure from the status of the slave as described by Patterson. Frank B. Wilderson et al. write in a contemporary context that the number of innocent black deaths at the hands of police officers signals a historical a-specificity to the relation of domination described by Patterson: in their account, "Black equals socially dead" (9). For Afro-pessimism, they continue, the way forward is "to understand Black liberation as a negative dialectic, a politics of refusal, and a refusal to affirm; as an embrace of disorder and incoherence; and as an act of political apostasy" (11). In Whitehead's association of Reconstruction with the fictional American Phoenix's interregnum, he agrees with Saidiya Hartman's description of "the nonevent of emancipation" (33). Another trope animating Afro-pessimist literature is the psychological element of non-black/black domination, wherein, as Wilderson puts it in an interview, "Violence against the slave sustains a kind of psychic stability for all others who are not slaves" ("Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation" 19). In this category in particular, *Zone One* seems to draw from Afro-pessimism.

There is a unique subset of passages in the novel that blur the lines between zombies and black Americans, passages in which the reader is forced to imagine that what is being described could refer to the pre-apocalyptic lives of black Americans as easily as it does to the post-apocalyptic zombies. Describing the relation between survivors and zombies, a man known only as The Lieutenant says, "Mustn't humanize them. The whole thing breaks down unless you are

fundamentally sure that they are not you" (195). Just as violence against black Americans is used as an identifying marker for non-black Americans, so too does violence against zombies sustain ontological difference. It is also here, however, where *Zone One* breaks from Afro-pessimism. Whereas Afro-pessimism posits that Western society is structured on anti-blackness, it is clear from the example above that Whitehead imagines a structuring ontology of we/they othering. That is, once African Americans are replaced by zombies as the story world's structuring psychological threat, pre-apocalyptic racism against African Americans dissipates. As Mark Spitz explains it, "There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them" (288).[20] In *Zone One*, black liberation is not achieved via Wilderson et al.'s "politics of refusal" but rather by the emergence of a more prominent ontological Other against and through which the survivors structure their identities. Aware of the contingency of racial harmony, Mark Spitz wonders, "Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on, and they were packed together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other?" (288). As much as he might hope otherwise, Mark Spitz is uniquely aware of the resilience of the past in American culture.

America's past crops up in *Zone One* in unexpected ways, inflecting language and metaphor. One such metaphor refers back to the American Phoenix's re-institution of private property rights. The narrator remarks, "The civilians in the camps could be policed, as most never left the perimeter, but untold Americans still walked the great out there, beyond order's embrace, like slaves who didn't know they'd been emancipated" (48). History and time are thoroughly interlinked in the novel: it is as if all of American history is not history at all but

[20] The zombie's ontological place in relation to non-zombies has been the subject of a rich body of research and theory far too extensive to cite in full here. Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry provide a comprehensive history and overview of the literature in their article on the subject, "A Zombie Manifesto."

rather a free-flowing series of references waiting to be picked out and recognized. As Faulkner famously writes in *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (85). The American Phoenix tries to build a new world in the wreckage of the old with the paradoxical intent of eschewing reference to more harmful memories and historical facts. The novel acts then as a connection-making machine, preserving history by shining a light on the way it persists in the present. As with so many of the texts in this thesis, *Zone One* positions positive thinking at the gulf between material reality and the ideal. As with real-world positive thinking, which refuses to let mounting income inequality stop it from judging the present moment as eminently livable, the positive thinking put forward by the American Phoenix is one that comically refuses to let material reality get in the way of its idealistic musings. The American Phoenix, with its desperate attachment to the old way of life, represents in the novel a larger force of not only stagnating thought but also of the stagnation of lived time in a world in which thought itself flatlines. If, in Marcuse's terms, negative thinking—"the judgment that condemns the established reality"—is indeed thought itself, or the second step in the dialectical process that judges negatively the world as it is, then the triumph of positive thinking is the death of thought (144).

Early in the novel it is indicated that the world pre- and post-apocalypse is much the same. The reader is introduced to Mark Spitz in the middle of a sweep of Manhattan buildings as he reminisces about his fantasy of New York as a child. In the retrospective narration of visiting the city with his parents, the now-older Mark Spitz ascribes zombie-inflected descriptions to the pre-apocalyptic world. Passersby are referred to as "lurching specimen" who, if tourists, have a "cow-eyed vacancy" and, if local New Yorkers, have "local wretchedness inverting their spines" (4). The retrospective assignment of zombie elements to the pre-apocalyptic world suggests a logical continuation of one world into the next, a similarity in type not set apart by the

differentiating mark of an apocalyptic event but instead an awakening to a new way in the present of understanding the past. This temporal a-specificity is captured not only in the free-indirect descriptions of the past but also in the very temporality of the prose itself. The narrative is characterized by the present-tense narration of a three-day period in Manhattan in which the protagonist attempts with his team to clear out and civilize the eponymous zone for future inhabitation. Throughout this linear narrative are various instances of reflection on the past generally not separated by anything like a section break or even, at times, so much as the start of a new paragraph. The beginning of the novel is an example of this latter type of non-transition. After several pages of reminiscing, the narrative comes back to the present in a manner so abrupt yet subtle that it is doubtless missed by first-time readers:

> His father wanted to be an astronaut when he was a kid, but the boy had never been anything but earthbound, kicking pebbles. All he was truly sure of was that he wanted to live in a city gadget, something well-stocked and white-walled, equipped with rotating bosomy beauties. His uncle's apartment resembled the future, a brand of manhood waiting on the other side of the river. When his unit finally started sweeping beyond the wall—whenever that was—he knew he had to visit Uncle Lloyd's apartment, to sit on the sectional one last time and stare at the final, empty screen in the series. (8)

The temporal texture in this passage is notably complex, moving seamlessly from past to present with the transition between them being speculation about "the future." The break from reminiscence upon the past to descriptions of the present comes between the last two lines, but it is probably not clear to the reader until several sentences later, when it is more explicit that the time of the narrative has fully transitioned to the zombie-infested time of the present. Daniel Grausam refers to Whitehead's narrative style as "multi-temporal," arguing that this style

"productively complicates any notion of contemporaneity as a homogenous experience of time" (118). The narrator, channeling the protagonist Mark Spitz's manner of thought, thinks about the future time in which his team of sweepers would get beyond the walls that contain Zone One and, realizing that this might be a fantasy, jokes "whenever that was." Marco Caracciolo argues that *Zone One* "favors a free-floating temporality that constantly blurs the dividing line between the pre- and the post-world" (235). This temporal a-specificity, or rather multiplicity, communicates not only the novel's central concern with the utopian longing at the heart of post-apocalyptic fiction—i.e., the baseless faith that there will be a time when the apocalypse has abated and expansionism can begin again—but also the deliberate confusion in the novel of what time is at any moment being narrated, a confusion meant to convey the interchangeability of the worlds pre- and post-apocalypse. Even the tense in which this line is communicated deliberately confuses the temporality of the narrative's transition. The thought is meant to deliberate on a future possible event but communicates it in the speculative past tense: whenever that was. The whole novel is narrated in the past tense, of course, but that in itself communicates a certain temporal a-specificity to any single event in the narrative. In his essay on *Zone One*, Carl Joseph Swanson gives a convincing account of the novel's indebtedness to and subversion of the zombie genre's barricade motif. For Swanson, barricades are represented by both literal structures—wooden boards nailed across windows, buildings/houses/barns, and walls—as well as figurative narrative distance created between survivors and their zombie antagonists. In zombie fictions, these barricades are erected with the inherent expectation that they will be brought down: the boarded-up windows are torn apart, and most survivors become zombies. By Swanson's account, "All literal barricades must fall; such fatalism is a prescription of the genre, a function of the internal tensions of the narrative and of the ineluctable rhetorical demands of an audience

seeking spectacle" (401).[21] As with all the literal barricades in the novel, then, I argue that Whitehead treats the formal barricades between past, present, and future as ultimately pliable and doomed to destruction.

In a world of stunted political imagination, time's direction is ultimately meaningless, and in the novel, this meaninglessness is grafted onto the genre of the zombie novel. If the post-apocalypse is normally meant to signal a dramatic shift from pre-apocalyptic modes of life, *Zone One* is primarily occupied with the myriad ways that life goes on as normal. In one of Whitehead's several innovations in the zombie genre, the novel features two distinct types of zombies: there is the commonplace brand of flesh-eating creatures, referred to as "skels"; and there is another kind that for most of the novel do not eat people but rather inhabit previous locations and activities of pre-apocalyptic comfort. Nicknamed "stragglers" for their characteristic clinging onto old forms of living, these figures—seen in customary capitalist haunts such as the copy room in an office building or the grill at a fast food chain—are characterological markers of neoliberal time's plateaued march. As Mark Spitz remarks early in the novel, "Why else were they in Manhattan but to transport the old ways across the violent passage of the calamity to the safety of the other side?" (59) Under neoliberal capitalism, the barriers between past, present, and future are virtually nonexistent. Instead, we are given the long present tense, with no origin and seemingly no terminus. This is the world that Mark Spitz occupies—the world of present-tense living. He explains early in the novel, "If you weren't concentrating on how to survive the next five minutes, you wouldn't survive them" (32). And though his attitude in the novel is relatively pessimistic, operating as a kind of antithesis to the American Phoenix and its exuberant positivity, he still lives as if his existence is assured, as if he

[21] As Sorensen argues convincingly, however, such "fatalism," in Swanson's words, is offset by the generic expectation of another shelter on the horizon.

will outlive those who die all around him. This may be in part because, unlike his non-black companions, Mark Spitz has been navigating existential precarity his whole life. His precarious post-apocalyptic life as a survivor is continuous with his precarious pre-apocalyptic life as a black man in America. Lacking nostalgia for a nonexistent pre-apocalyptic utopia—and by extension lacking hope for a similar future utopia—he does not fall for the "pheenie bullshit" that the American Phoenix peddles, distracting "thoughts of the future" that could get someone killed in the moment-to-moment existence of post-apocalyptic life (32). For Mark Spitz, the transition from pre- to post-apocalypse was not experienced as rupture, imbuing the narrative with a unique temporal texture.

Linear time is often conceived of as a naturally progressive determinant in post-apocalyptic—and especially zombie—fictions. That is, the passage of time is seen as a natural, civilizing process by which humanity rises from its embers and returns anew. Consider the difference between the worlds of *28 Days Later* (2002) and its sequel, *28 Weeks Later* (2007). If the former film depicts the struggle for life, a quintessential survival story, the latter depicts the struggle for a return to past forms of life, a quintessential reconstruction story. After a considerable amount of time has passed since the first film, the second assumes that the world has been mostly rebuilt, or at least safe zones have been constructed in which the previous world's customs and laws have been reinstated. A similar progressive telos can be observed in the television show, *The Walking Dead* (2010—present), where ramshackle shelters such as boarded-up houses, unprotected campgrounds, and remote farms in the first season are replaced in later seasons by heavily fortified communities and gated prison yards.[22] This progression

[22] In zombie fictions especially, the presence of a fence or wall generally conveys a sense of comfort and safety from outside dangers. These "gated communities" recall the new form of racial segregation in the United States. For an in-depth study of gated communities and 21st century racial segregation, see Elena Vesselinov's article "Members Only."

suggests that the new world's inhabitants have *learned* something about the new way of life, that they have understood the rules as they exist in the present and have thus adapted in their struggle not only for survival but for reconstruction. Whitehead changes the rules of teleology in zombie narratives, however. As Sorensen writes, "Against the late-capitalist fantasy of a future that consists of an endless reproduction of the present, Whitehead offers the shocking possibility of an absolute ending" (561). For Whitehead, time is not progressive but rather simply continuous. The re-emergence of recognizable forms of capitalism brings to mind Fredric Jameson's famous aphorism, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (76).

The novel's last word on narrative positivity is thus the novel's end itself. Though the reader is taken on a semi-traditional narrative ride through busted barns and infested malls throughout the novel, all the ominous talk of foreclosed endings and pessimistic teleology comes to fruition when, in the last two-dozen pages, the walls securing Zone One inevitably fall. A short escape attempt is made before eventually all hope of escaping the island is lost and Mark Spitz commits suicide by stepping into the midst of the zombie horde. As Sorensen writes, "While conventional post-apocalyptic narratives reassert the imperative to preserve and reproduce life, Whitehead's novel embraces the death-drive" (588). This death-drive is signaled as the rupture is occurring, Mark Spitz realizing, "It was happening again: the end of the world […] This time we cannot delude ourselves that we will make it out alive" (318). In this scene, the novel throws into stark relief the very nature of post-apocalyptic literature. Centered on life after the apocalypse, post-apocalyptic literature takes the air out of the idea of apocalypse itself, which is meant to signal the end of the world. The joke of the line here rests in the possibility of the end of the world "happening again," but this notion is the very bedrock of post-apocalyptic literature.

The genre showcases the trials and tribulations of people who have somehow survived what should be the end of humanity. As Sorensen argues, "The 'post' places us on the far side of a rupture and encourages us to see any impending crisis as another transition, and not as a potential conclusion" (590). As the walls are literally coming down around him, and along with them the last vestige of hope for the reemergence of human civilization, Mark Spitz decides, "Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (322). Along with the end of his protagonist's narrative, Whitehead reveals the apocalypse as the end of narrative altogether. *Zone One* is almost a dramatization of Fukuyama's (in)famous claim that history has ended. The novel performs, or plays out, the eschatological vision underneath Fukuyama's triumphalist account. For Whitehead, the end of a multiplicity of political thought might as well signal the end of the history of man. Just like so many apocalyptic fictions before it, *Zone One* allows the reader a spectatorial gaze at the end of the world, but counter to its generic conventions, the novel forecloses on the possibility of a new beginning for humanity characterized by repetitions of the past. Whitehead radicalizes the importance of a politics defined by opposition to the status quo, conceiving of a positive politics as the death of thought and history itself.

Conclusion, or, Possibly the End of Something or Other

The President of the United States has written a self-help book. Or rather, 45th President of the United States Donald J. Trump has written upwards of a dozen self-help books, but there is one in particular that warrants closer inspection during a global pandemic. Part stay-rich guide, part autobiographical boast, *Trump: How to Get Rich* was published in 2004, the same year that saw the premiere of Trump's reality television show *The Apprentice*. In *How to Get Rich*, Trump advises his readers to think positively, recommending that they read Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*, "one of my father's favorite books, and mine, too" (76).[1] Trump, a self-professed "tough-minded optimist," believes that "negative thinking stems from low self-esteem" (75, 76). His schema of positivity and negativity does not stop at thought, however; Trump also equates positive thinking with good hygiene. He writes:

> I used to have to zap negativity mentally. By now, it just bounces off me within a moment of getting near me. As you may have heard, I don't like germs. I'm still waging a personal crusade to replace the mandatory and unsanitary handshake with the Japanese custom of bowing. To me, germs are just another kind of negativity. (75)

Trump, then, is a positive thinker from the New Thought school, a student of Peale as well as of Mary Baker Eddy, who firmly believed that ill health could be combatted via positive visualization.[2] Further, though—and in keeping with my analysis in Chapter 2—Trump carries

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[1] Trump's affinity for Peale is no secret. The positive thinking prophet, who was Trump's childhood minister, also presided over Trump's first marriage (Kruse). Trump has also mentioned Peale in interviews as well as at his campaign rallies. In an interview with Jay Dixit for *Psychology Today*, Trump said, "My father was friends with Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, and I had read his famous book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. I'm a cautious optimist but also a firm believer in the power of being positive. I think that helped. I refused to be sucked into negative thinking on any level, even when the indications weren't great."

[2] The title of Trump's book, *How to Get Rich*, is also reminiscent of the title of positive thinker Napoleon Hill's bestselling book *Think and Grow Rich!*, if slightly less elegantly phrased.

over the logics of positive and negative thought to the domain of the body itself, erecting an image of mind and body centered on the motif of purity.

Yet if Trump exhibits a considerable aversion to germs and the "negativity" they represent, how does one make sense of his response to 2020's COVID-19 pandemic? As early as February of 2020, Trump was making false claims about the burgeoning pandemic, downplaying its severity, which he argued was an overblown "hoax" dreamt up by the Democratic Party. He also said that the virus would eventually, "like a miracle," disappear (Milman). To make sense of the conflict between Trump's personal germaphobia and his political stance against quarantine, Fintan O'Toole has argued that Trump's belief in positive thinking is particularly illuminating. In *How to Get Rich*, following his description of germs as a kind of negativity, Trump writes about a friend who suffered an almost unbelievable series of accidents, landing in the hospital for several months before going home via an ambulance, only to then be the victim of a traffic accident in said ambulance. For Trump, however, this sequence of events is not necessarily so unbelievable. He writes, "What can I say? Maybe he's just a really unlucky guy. Or maybe he's a loser. I know that sounds harsh but let's face it—some people *are* losers" (78). O'Toole argues that this passage reveals the core of Trump's ideology: "Losers are inevitably doomed by their own negativity, of which germs are a physical form. Infection happens to some people because they are natural losers." Trump's outlook, apart from fairly clearly matching positive thinking's strange form of cynicism, also drips with neoliberal rhetoric, which also tends to separate people into the categories of winners and losers. Yet despite Trump's efforts to expedite the economy's reopening in the midst of the pandemic, the fact of shutdowns and quarantines across the world has led some to suspect that neoliberalism and its ideological stranglehold have waned and may

even be on the way out. Writing for *Open Democracy*, Jeremy Lent is one of many to argue that the crisis brought about by COVID-19 "spells the end for neoliberalism."

Economists and journalists have been sounding the death knell of neoliberalism for the past decade or so, while the world watches neoliberal norms assert themselves as common sense in more and more insidious ways. As 2019 came to a close, two articles—less than a month apart—declared that neoliberalism's end was near. Economist Joseph Stiglitz claimed that neoliberalism's ideological faults had been exposed in the financial collapse of 2008 and the ongoing environmental crisis. According to Stiglitz, "The credibility of neoliberalism's faith in unfettered markets as the surest road to shared prosperity is on life-support these days." Ganesh Sitaraman, writing for *The New Republic*, argued along similar lines: "With the 2008 financial crash and the Great Recession, the ideology of neoliberalism lost its force." Premature attempts at declaring neoliberalism's end seem to me plagued by a singular misapprehension of the logics of neoliberalism's ideological dominance, and this misapprehension is characterized by a specific belief about crises and their potential effects.

These predictions are often centered on crises, which for the oracles in question represent commonsense contradictions to the claims put forward by neoliberal ideologues. When the global economy was launched into a recession in 2008 due in no small part to the lack of oversight on speculative finance, experts the world over recognized that neoliberal policies were to blame and therefore must be supplanted by more regulatory measures.[3] This expectation, however, arises from a misrecognition of neoliberalism's ability to, in Philip Mirowski's words, "never let a serious crisis go to waste." As Helen DeWitt illustrates in *Lightning Rods*, those who

[3] David M. Kotz wrote in 2009 that it was likely that the 2008 financial crisis would bring about "a new form of capitalism or […] a transition beyond capitalism" (316). Jon Meacham, writing for *Newsweek* in 2009, proclaimed in the wake of the crisis that "we are all socialists now."

succeed in the neoliberal system have a particular competence for exploiting crises—in the case of that novel, the financial "crisis" of sexual harassment lawsuits against corporations. If crises have historically presented opportunities for neoliberal policymakers to make further policy gains, as Naomi Klein and Mirowski have argued, it nonetheless makes sense that there would exist a parallel possibility for anti-neoliberal policy. These articles tend to convincingly lay out the contradictions of neoliberalism as they relate to and inform whatever crisis is at hand or in the proximate past, but they do so with the misguided belief that a diagnosis of the problem necessarily leads to that problem's cure.

The reassessment of values in response to COVID-19 has highlighted some of neoliberalism's philosophical deficiencies.[4] While the healthy functioning of the market is at the center of neoliberal concern, most national economies have taken a back seat to public safety during the crisis, a considerable departure from the norms established by neoliberal policy. And yet, this "considerable departure" was treated by most as common sense. Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism presents as "a normative order of reason," governing not with the force of the authoritarian but rather "as sophisticated common sense" (9, 35). Therefore the space opened up by COVID-19's reconfiguration of common sense to deprivilege the economy in favor of public health presents an opportunity to extend the logic of this crisis to the level of policy.[5] In the United States, however, the transition from a market-based to a public health-based government has not been so smooth. If most countries continued to keep their economies closed as the summer approached, Trump consistently—and prematurely—argued for the American

[4] This is the argument put forward by Lent, who writes, "The specter of massive layoffs and unemployment has already led to levels of state intervention to protect citizens and businesses that were previously unthinkable […] The idea of universal basic income for every American, boldly raised by long-shot Democratic candidate Andrew Yang, has now become a talking point even for Republican politicians."

[5] Bruno Latour took to Twitter to argue this exact point, writing, "Next time, when ecologists are ridiculed because 'the economy cannot be slowed down,' they should remember that it can grind to a halt in a matter of weeks worldwide when it is urgent enough" (@BrunoLatourAIME).

economy's reopening, despite the considerable threat to those who would be primarily responsible for doing so. Republican politicians have even gone so far as to describe the early reopening of the economy in the terms of a neoliberal cost-benefit analysis wherein a certain number of deaths is permissible so long as the economy is up and running again.[6]

While neoliberal policymakers are doing their best to keep the economy at the center of the conversation on COVID-19, ideologues of positive thinking have attempted to use the crisis to their advantage. Times like these would hardly seem to call for bright-sided positive thinking, but its avatars have nevertheless attempted to stake their claim on the public sentiment. A simple search for "positive thinking coronavirus" returns millions of results, including articles published by *The Guardian, The Conversation, Forbes, BBC*, and others. Writing for *The Guardian*, Lea Waters takes the route of positive psychologists, using a handful of studies to argue for the importance of a positive mindset as it pertains to the threat of contracting the virus itself. By Waters's account, "the best in human nature is rising to the coronavirus challenge."[7] Dusana Dorjee, writing for *The Conversation*, instructs readers, "If you notice having anxious thoughts soon after waking, try to think about something positive if you can."[8] Most advice is largely

[6] Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick suggested in an interview with Fox News host Tucker Carlson that grandparents would be willing to sacrifice themselves for the healthy functioning of the economy and the prosperity of their grandchildren (Stieb).

[7] Waters supports this claim by citing incidents in which individuals and communities have come together to lend support to those less fortunate. Her examples, however, are informed by a neoliberal analysis. She writes, for example, "Philanthropists are donating money to scientists to find a cure," an act that should not be necessary in a society that privileges research and public health over the upward distribution of income. She also cites the example of "medical staff [who] are working overtime to help sick patients," an example of the failings of the neoliberal defunding of nationalized healthcare.

[8] Dorjee is more extensive than Waters in her citation of research in the field of positive psychology. She also, however, repeats the oft-cited speculative-evolutionary argument about negativity bias fronted by Seligman and others within the positive psychological field. Dorjee writes, "Our mind has a built-in negativity bias making us think of and remember negative events better than positive ones. From an evolutionary perspective, this was important so that we would remember not to eat certain foods that made us ill a second time, for example." As I argued earlier, this line of argumentation naturalizes rates of depression that are not remaining static but rather increasing, especially in the last half-century. It also tows the neoliberal line that would see potentially political or systemic issues individualized rather than systematized.

innocuous, exhorting people to keep their chins up by limiting consumption of the bad news that comes out on a daily basis. Some advice, however, approaches the nastier side of positive thinking described by Barbara Ehrenreich. In her article, Waters cites the studied correlation between a positive attitude and an increased immunity to infection. She writes, "a study where people were deliberately infected with the influenza virus and rhinovirus found that those people who had more positive emotions were more likely to fight off the symptoms. People low on positive emotions were 2.9 times more likely to contract a respiratory illness in this study." Despite the scientific credibility of this claim, there is something particularly cruel about making a connection between negativity and illness, namely that it blames people for their own misfortunes. As Ehrenreich writes, "The flip side of positivity is thus a harsh insistence on personal responsibility" (8). This insistence makes positive thinking adept at dealing with crises.

Positive thinking capitalizes on crises in a manner similar to neoliberalism, though not necessarily as insidiously as neoliberal policymakers, nor with their ability for forethought. Rather, positive thinking has a particular knack for arriving at just the time people are most desperate, as I illustrated in my analysis in Chapter 4 of post-apocalyptic narratives and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* specifically. Is it any wonder that positive thinking was borne out of the Gilded Age, when Americans were made to experience the fullest extent of capitalism's embedded inequalities? Further still, it seems no coincidence that positive thinking should experience a considerable resurgence when neoliberal policies would bring about levels of inequality that has led many commentators to refer to the neoliberal era as the "second Gilded Age."[9] Positive thinking works like an advertising agency for society at large, and like a good

[9] Political commentator Kevin Phillips coined the term in his book *The Politics of Rich and Poor* (1990) to describe rates of economic inequality following Ronald Reagan's presidency. Since then the term has been used fairly liberally by commentators on the left as a useful historical referent. *The New Yorker* published a special edition with the title *The New Gilded Age* (2000), featuring short essays on related subjects by household names such as Joan

advertising agency, positive thinking's mouthpieces know how to make a product shine no matter the current conditions. An example of this is the theory that negativity is an unfortunate default emotion left over from our prehistoric ancestors. Martin Seligman told an interviewer in 2000:

> It is surprising that we have very high levels of depression and pessimism in a world in which the hands on the nuclear clock are farther away from midnight than they have ever been, in a nation in which every economic indicator, every objective indicator of well-being, is going north. (Freedman)

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, in their groundbreaking 2009 study of inequality and well-being, *The Spirit Level*, contradict Seligman's assertion and point to an explanation for America's ongoing mental illness crisis that has less to do with appeals to individual character and more to do with economic and political forces that have created unprecedented levels of financial inequality. In agreement with Seligman, Wilkinson and Pickett show that GDP and median levels of income *alone* do not correlate with objective measures of well-being. However, in opposition to Seligman's arguments for perspective and his ideal of human moral "character," Wilkinson and Pickett point out a strong correlation between income inequality—that is the disparities in wealth distribution between income brackets within societies—and a plethora of mental and social ailments. Not only health and social problems but also mental illness, life expectancy, and infant mortality strongly correlate with income inequality in rich countries. In the study of mental illness and its relation to income inequality, the United States ranked highest

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Didion, John Updike, and David Brooks. Noted economist Paul Krugman penned an article for *The New York Review of Books* titled "Why We're in a New Gilded Age" (2014). Others such as Steve Fraser, James Livingston, and David Huyssen have responded with think pieces critical of this catchy phrase, arguing that it misses the key differences between historical eras separated by a century.

in both categories among developed nations, with over 25 percent of citizens being diagnosed with a mental illness in their lifetimes.

While positive thinking might not be directly responsible for the inequality itself, it shares part of the blame for the cultural resistance to putting forth amendments to the economic structure that perpetuates such inequality. George Saunders's stories in particular highlight the paradox of ideological positivity in the minds of neoliberalism's biggest losers. A 2008 Brookings Institute study of American inequality and American citizens' responses thereto concluded that "strong belief in opportunity and upward mobility is the explanation that is often given for Americans' high tolerance for inequality. The majority of Americans surveyed believe that they will be above mean income in the future (even though that is a mathematical impossibility)" (Graham and Chattopadhyay). The belief in individual exceptionalism, the view that the individual can somehow transcend statistics, is in positive psychology terminology a "positive illusion." Positive illusion is a term originating from a 1988 study by Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown titled "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health." Challenging the assumption that mental health is characterized by "accurate perceptions of the self, the world, and the future," Taylor and Brown found evidence that people judged to be more well-adjusted have optimistic biases in all three categories (193). The category that pertains to the self here has its own term, *illusory superiority,* which Vera Hoorens describes as the "overvaluation of one's own attributes" (117). Rather than being beneficial to the individual, however, this misinformed trust in upward mobility is itself the very belief that keeps Americans invested in an economic system that insures against that mobility. This paradox is referred to by Lauren Berlant as "cruel optimism," the phenomenon in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1).

The literature I have studied in this thesis almost unanimously agrees on the toxicity of positive thinking, though not all agree on what may replace it. Counter to positive thinking, negative thinking is, according to Marcuse, "the judgment that condemns the established reality" (144). It is the contradiction of an object in its given state toward the end of resolving it to its Idea, or its essence. In the Hegelian dialectical movement of history and ideas, negative thinking, or antithetical thinking, is a necessary step in the progressive movement of becoming. It is the required contradiction of things as they are to move them in the direction of how they "ought to be," to borrow from Marcuse's parlance (137). As Theodor Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), "the seriousness of unswerving negation lies in its refusal to lend itself to sanctioning things as they are" (159). Positive thinking may make us feel happy in the short- and potentially even long-term, asking us to avoid sweating the small stuff and try to see the good that lies within a bad situation, but it does so at the expense of political consciousness. If neoliberalism is conceived of as a freedom from governmental paternalism, positive thinking is, in a way, a sort of freedom from the ethical and emotional difficulties of political consciousness, a problem Saunders highlights in "Brad Carrigan, American," where positive thinking requires the ignorance of others' suffering. Positive thinking is comforting but only because it asks us to stay either silent or unaware of our place and the place of others within a socio-political hierarchy. It demands that we not discomfort ourselves with considerations of our own suffering and the suffering of others. Instead, we are to think of suffering in a different light: not as suffering but rather becoming, not losing but striving. We are to construct our very own "layoff narratives," as Ed Park puts it in *Personal Days*, redemptive story arcs wherein any setback is minor and our ultimate triumph over adversity assured. For many of the authors I have studied, a truly emancipatory, revolutionary spirit demands negativity. It demands that we look always beyond

the horizon of our current political system. In *The Flamethrowers*, Rachel Kushner illustrates the centrality of crisis and political negativity to historical change. If nothing else, the governmental protectionism in response to the COVID-19 pandemic represents the potential for a change to our post-pandemic political priorities, and it is up to the negative thinkers among us to harness that potential.

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