

“The Family Gone Wrong”: Post-Postmodernism, Neoliberalism, and the Contemporary Novel’s Contract with the Reader

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

“CONTRACT” KIND OF PEOPLE

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, novelist Jonathan Franzen wrote a series of widely-discussed essays questioning the value of “difficult” fiction, and in 2005 writer Ben Marcus responded with his own widely-discussed essay, “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction.”¹ One might expect Marcus, an avowed experimentalist, to use this “correction” to defend an author’s right to be “difficult” – their right to ignore, or even seek to frustrate, the desires of the reader. In other words, one might expect Marcus to

dismiss the very notion of an authorial “contract,” the concept Franzen uses to justify his rejection of difficult writing:

Every writer is first a member of a community of readers, and the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness; and so a novel deserves a reader's attention only as long as the author sustains the reader's trust.²

Instead, Marcus's essay proves to be yet another defense of the reader, namely those readers to whom difficulty provides both the “pleasurable experience” and “sense of connectedness” that Franzen demands of fiction.³ “Some of us feel relief when we read this kind of writing,” Marcus writes, “because it proves there is always more to think and feel, *always another mind to engage and enter*, always intensities we did not know existed.”⁴ In the essay's concluding paragraph, Marcus explicitly adopts Franzen's “Contract” metaphor to declare: “This isn't a manifesto. It's a response to an attack from the highest point of status culture. The contract I signed? Not to stand by when a populist pundit puts up his dull wall and says what literature can and cannot be.”⁵

As these lines suggest, then, Marcus joins Franzen in obscuring the difference between author and reader – there *is* no difference, only “us,” the “community of readers” the author is “first” a part of and contractually obligated to “sustain.” Both authors also resolve the antagonism that traditionally exists *between* such “communities.” Although Marcus provides several rationales for why he prefers “experimentalism” to “realism,” his final remark clarifies that “This isn't a manifesto”; instead of making a call to action, asserting the superiority or historical urgency of his particular aesthetic practices, Marcus writes his essay because:

it seemed important to hear from the kind of reader that Franzen seems to be claiming does not, or should not, actually exist. I am not advocating the complex or difficult approach as the superior one, or claiming that it is better than seeking to commune with the largest possible audience.⁶

And, in fact, Franzen is not making this type of claim either; as critics like James Wood have noted, Franzen's attacks on the “big social novel” and formal experimentation (gestures which he sees as intertwined in the work of writers like William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon) all seem to resolve themselves, over the course of the essays in which they appear, into declarations of personal identity rather than aesthetic critiques.⁷ Accessible fiction is not superior, it seems, it's simply that, “In my bones ... I'm a Contract kind of person.”⁸

According to this logic, the different styles may coexist; indeed, this logic *insists* that the different styles coexist, that there be as many styles as there are “kind of reader” or “kind of person.” In this sense, Franzen and Marcus’s disagreement, one of the most high-profile literary debates of the last twenty years, turns out to be a way of making genuine artistic disagreement impossible. This outcome points to another surprising consensus: their notion of an authorial “contract” proves to be hard to distinguish from what Franzen describes as the Contract model “taken to its free-market extreme,” that which declares “You’re the consumer; you rule.”⁹ Whether imagining the world of letters as a collection of literary “kinds” (to be sustained because of the value of kinship itself) or as a collection of market segments (the mass market and the niche market, to be serviced so the consumer can “rule”), both visions transform the traditional aesthetic conflict between mainstream novelist and avant-garde novelist into a relationship that isn’t a conflict at all.¹⁰

Thus, even while distancing themselves from the discourse of the “free-market extreme”—or what academics have taken to calling neoliberalism—Franzen and Marcus nevertheless perform this discourse’s fundamental gesture, the disavowal of structural antagonism. As their texts suggest, this disavowal is predicated on a logic that personalizes impersonal relationships and thereby resolves otherwise irresolvable conflicts. If the main conflict resolved here is the clash between aesthetic ideologies, the main conflict to be resolved by neoliberal political rhetoric is class tension, the disavowal necessary to embrace the egalitarian premise that with liberalized economic markets, the “consumer” (rather than, say, the rich) will “rule.” This embrace is made possible through what Michel Foucault and subsequent interpreters have described as the logic of “human capital,” the economic discourse which attributes social outcomes to something “embedded or embodied in the person,” whether a personal choice or a personal quality or some mutually reinforcing combination of the two.¹¹ In practice, this logic has functioned mainly as a way of attributing social problems to personal deficiencies—poverty reflects a lack of “personal responsibility” —or as a way of reframing everything (even poverty) as the product of personal choices; a loss of “monetary” income may be re-described, for example, as the choice to pursue “psychic income” instead.¹²

While other critics have also linked Franzen’s writing with neoliberal discourse, the analysis above suggests that such thinking informs a variety of contemporary texts, including the “experimentalism” of a writer like Marcus, whose work has sometimes been defined as an alternative to a neoliberal aesthetics.¹³ The two novelists’ commitment to their readers also suggests, moreover, that neoliberal culture cannot be explained by familiar political binaries like the opposition between individualism and

communitarianism, as here we see that a personalization of the social may play out, counter-intuitively, as a desire for collectivity, whether a “community of readers” or (as I discuss below) a family with strong “family values.” To explore these implications, this essay will examine the formal and thematic concerns of a range of texts, including both realist novels and harder-to-classify works like Marcus’s *Notable American Women*, whose formal innovations dramatize the tension between family values and experimental “impersonality.” These millennial novels, published in the 1990s and after, will turn out to be importantly different from their postmodern antecedents, and thus I will argue that neoliberalism can serve as a periodizing device for American fiction, just as it does for American politics. As I argue in my conclusion, however, these connections only become clear if we reject critical accounts of this social vision that obscure its chief historical impact, the production of economic winners and losers, accounts which thereby reproduce the very disavowals that helped make this “Age of Inequality” possible.¹⁴

“EVERY BUSINESS IS A FAMILY BUSINESS”

Neoliberalism’s personalizing tendencies are visible even in texts like Hillary Clinton’s *It Takes a Village* (1996), which complains that, “instead of ‘We’re all in this together,’ the message from the top is frequently, ‘You’re on your own.’”¹⁵ That is, Clinton’s book suggests that when companies favor “short-term profits” over policies that benefit workers, the cause is a failure of a sense of “mutual responsibility,” a view that seems to ignore how the impersonal requirements of capitalist accumulation trump such expressions of sociality just as thoroughly as they trump “personal responsibility.”¹⁶ In other words, Clinton’s celebration of “community values” proves to be yet another way of attributing poverty and inequality to anything *but* the contradictions intrinsic to the free market, the maneuver necessary for liberal politicians during this period to embrace the right-wing critique of the welfare state even while declaring “It takes a village to raise a child.”¹⁷

Political texts like Clinton’s book are thus particularly useful for thinking about the social commitments on display in the Franzen-Marcus debate, for they remind us that what literary critic Colin Hutchinson has described as the “communitarian” reaction to “the rise of Reaganite economic libertarianism” actually underscores the triumph of this market-friendly discourse.¹⁸ That is, despite its rejection of a “libertarian-individualist ethic”—a rejection Hutchinson finds in Franzen’s *The Corrections* but which we can see in the novelist’s critical writing as well—this

communitarianism is best understood as a version of, rather than an alternative to, neoliberalism.¹⁹ This link is crucial for considering the political vision of contemporary American fiction, precisely because—as novelist Garth Risk Hallberg has noted—so many contemporary writers share the idea that “the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness.”²⁰ As we saw above, this notion cuts across stylistic divides like the opposition between experimentalists and realists, uniting writers as distinct as Marcus and Franzen or (to use two of Hallberg’s examples) David Foster Wallace and Jeffrey Eugenides. Wallace’s famous 1993 critique of postmodern “irony” is predicated, after all, on the idea that by making “expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability” seem “passé,” such irony has made us “lonelier”²¹; meanwhile, in the same online commentary that Eugenides dismisses “the moves people make today to seem antitraditional ... the footnote thing, the author appearing in the book, etc.” (i.e. moves famously made by Wallace), he also declares: “What I want in a book is a refuge from the noise and confusion, plus a reminder that *another human being is on the other end of the exchange.*”²²

While this new emphasis on maintaining connectedness can be understood as a defensive reaction to the declining status of “high-canonical purity,” now regarded as merely a form of “cultural capital” (as Hallberg suggests), or to the declining status of the novel more generally (as Franzen sometimes suggests), it also seems to reflect a broader change in how American authors represent social relationships, including the relationship between writers and readers. Notwithstanding obvious differences, the U.S. writers who have been canonized as “postmodern”—from “systems novelists” like Pynchon and Gaddis to “high cultural pluralists” like Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko—all tend to imagine the world in terms of impersonal structures of power, culture, and historical narrative, asking us to view the “world ... as constructed.”²³ By contrast, these younger novelists (mostly born in or around the 1960s) tend to represent social relations in terms of those personal “expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability” described by Wallace. Hence they write stories in which, for example, metafiction—the technique by which postmodern writers explore the constructedness of concepts like “author” and “reader”—is reinterpreted as a “highly rhetorical sham honesty that’s designed to get you to like him and approve of him (i.e. of the meta-type writer).”²⁴ Hence in Eugenides’ most recent novel a character responds to a query about her artistic “father” (“Is it Virginia Woolf? Is it Sontag?”) by declaring, “In my case ... my father really is my father,” signifying her author’s impatience with a postmodern worldview more interested in intertextuality—and thus the relationship between authors and influences—than the relationship between literal fathers and daughters.²⁵

As many critics have argued, postmodernism's insistence on the determining power of subject position—our position within those impersonal structures of meaning—may itself function as a way of disavowing the irreducible antagonisms of late capitalism.²⁶ Still, the personalizing logic of contemporary texts indicates that these writers have more in common with their political contemporaries than their literary predecessors, suggesting that this self-conscious “post-postmodernism” is best understood as the means by which the American novel participates in the neoliberal turn.²⁷ This literary vision often takes the form of a celebration of “community,” as I’ve just noted, but—as the example from Eugenides’ novel suggests—it also takes a more surprising form, a celebration of family, a political and social ideal that is sometimes contrasted with that of communitarianism but which will turn out to be structurally equivalent.²⁸ Exploring this commitment helps clarify the aesthetic and political shift embodied by these texts: whereas postmodern novels about the family—books like Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) and Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987)—focus on the cultural constructs and institutions that mediate (or destroy) family relationships, the contemporary novels I examine here focus directly on the affective and ethical bonds comprising these relationships.

Indeed, one of the most striking features of US literary post-postmodernism is its tendency to participate in a discourse that is typically marked as conservative but which has been crucial to the neoliberal consensus since 1992, when Bill Clinton—borrowing from his Republican opponents—made it central to his Presidential campaign: the “late twentieth-century moralistic discourse on family values.”²⁹ Beyond its celebration of fathers who are really fathers, *The Marriage Plot* can be read more specifically as “an attempt by Eugenides to reclaim [marriage] for a generation and demographic – and to champion the old-fashioned realist novel as a serious pursuit for thoughtful novelists.”³⁰ That is, by redeeming marriage, Eugenides intends to redeem the narrative form most closely associated with it, the marriage plot itself, rescuing it from those who (like Madeleine Hanna’s Victorian Lit professor) say the plot has lost meaning because of women’s equality and the liberalization of divorce law, as well as those who (like Madeleine’s Semiotics textbooks) dismiss the romantic love underpinning Western marriage as “culturally constructed.”³¹

Eugenides stages this redemption through a plotline that turns on the changing interpretation of a line from one of those textbooks, Roland Barthes’s *Lover’s Discourse*, which declares: “Once the first avowal has been made, ‘I love you’ has no meaning whatsoever.”³² We first encounter this line after Madeleine has just said “I love you” to her classmate Leonard Bankhead for the first time. In the context of the young semioticians’ paranoia about the “tyranny” of cultural constructs, however, we might

imagine that the “first avowal” is intended to refer also to the first *historical* utterance, the very founding of the “lover’s discourse,” the long tradition of which renders Madeleine’s own statement trite and insincere.³³ As if reaching this same conclusion, the two lovers stop being lovers at the very moment Leonard brings the line to her attention. When the quote appears for the second time, he insists on a very different interpretation: “No, but—think about it,” Leonard tells Madeleine. “That means the first avowal *does* have meaning.”³⁴ Leonard is thus clarifying not only the “meaning” of “the first avowal” but also the referent of the word “first”: he invokes the line to refer specifically to Madeleine’s “first avowal,” which has already occurred, and his own “first avowal,” which is still to come. Just as when Eugenides reminds us what the word “father” really means, the author is here redirecting our attention away from the public discourses that constitute subjects and toward the dynamics of a particular personal relationship, in which saying “I love you” is meaningful precisely because it crucially changes that relationship. As if as a result of this reinterpretation, the two lovers become lovers again, an affair that culminates in marriage and, eventually, an emotionally fraught divorce – a resolution that doesn’t so much negate the significance of their decision to get married as confirm it.

Of course, if marriage needs redeeming in 1982, when *The Marriage Plot* is set, it no longer needs redeeming by 2011, when the novel is published. By 2011, in other words, affirming the meaningfulness of this choice had become deeply uncontroversial. Indeed, it is an assumption shared by both sides of one of the most high-profile contemporary political debates. Writers like Yasmin Nair (co-founder of the queer activist group “Against Equality”) have argued that the radical left’s recent embrace of marriage, in the form of the marriage-equality movement, reflects the triumph of a fundamental assumption of “family values” discourse: the idea that the family, not the state, is responsible for a citizen’s health and wealth-being.³⁵ This is the assumption tacitly accepted by those who argue that marriage equality is necessary for guaranteeing access to health care for same-sex couples, as Nair notes, and it’s the assumption uniting political texts as distinct as *It Takes a Village* and Rick Santorum’s pointedly titled rejoinder, *It Takes a Family* (2005).

There are many important political differences between Hillary Clinton and Rick Santorum, of course, but both Democrat and Republican agree that the role of government is precisely “to strengthen families” and, in so doing, strengthen “the village,” which, whether being used literally (Santorum) or metaphorically (Clinton), is said to be organized by the same values as the family.³⁶ As Santorum puts it, “the family creates, strengthens, nurtures, and replenishes” the “five pillars of American civilization: social capital, economic capital, moral capital, cultural capital, and

intellectual capital,” which means that the way to help “low-income families” is not to redistribute “economic capital” but to foster “the formation, stability, and success of the traditional family.”³⁷ Clinton seems to endorse this prescription for the poor, a consensus reflected in the fact that welfare reform—justified by her husband Bill as way to inculcate “the basic values of work, responsibility and family”—is trumpeted as a success in *both* Santorum and Clinton’s books.³⁸

Although this political focus on the family is obviously not new, what does seem historically distinct is the way in which family and other basic “values”—typically thought to be valuable precisely because they *cannot* be reduced to economic value—are equated directly with human capital, the substance said to determine the fate of both individuals and nation-states in the increasingly globalized marketplace. This strange social logic seems, in turn, to generate strange new literary forms, like Franzen’s *The Corrections*, which Wood characterizes as a mix of the DeLilloesque encyclopedic novel and the “novel of intimacy, of motive, of relation,” that is, the novel of family³⁹. But whereas Wood sees this as an aesthetically inept “wavering” between two forms, I suggest that we might view *The Corrections* as, instead, a hybrid, a novel that mixes a familiar postmodern genre with a commitment to the family, and thus creates something historically specific: a reinvention of the “big social novel” appropriate for the period in which (to invoke Margaret Thatcher) family actively displaces society.⁴⁰

Franzen himself provides what is probably the best label for this form—it’s his “Clinton novel”—and while he uses this phrase to describe the book’s setting (post-Cold War, pre-9/11 America), it turns out to be an apt description of the book’s social vision as well.⁴¹ The novel articulates the various new ways in which “the wealthy few subdue the unwealthy many,” and yet, like the Clintons, Franzen seems to gesture to these conflicts only to resolve them with a return to the family.⁴² The storyline focusing on Chip Lambert, the family’s middle child, for example, dramatizes how American financial elites take advantage of IMF-mandated restructuring in newly liberalized nations, enriching themselves at the cost of crippling damage to those nations’ infrastructures. After he gets embroiled in a conflict with Lithuanian oligarchs and loses all his money, however, Chip’s story seems to change: he has lost his money, but more importantly he has “lost track of himself.”⁴³ He will quickly rediscover “himself,” however, in his nation—“The continent, his homeland”—and more centrally his family.⁴⁴ As the novel concludes, and after returning to his parents’ Midwestern home on Christmas Day, Chip appears to have been “miraculously transformed,” “as if his consciousness had been shorn of all identifying marks and transplanted, metempsychotically, in the body of a steady son, a trustworthy brother.”⁴⁵ Indeed, he will start making sacrifices on behalf of his family (and his own new wife and child) for

the first time, as if accepting not only his membership in the Lambert clan but the responsibilities that (according to family-values discourse) come with membership.

The novel's narrative logic suggests, then, that being a dedicated member of a family can substitute for (and thus resolve the conflicts of) being a participant in the global economy, even though these two types of relationships are—from a perspective that insists on class antagonism—crucially different.⁴⁶ Of course, Franzen's self-conscious literary traditionalism might make his implicit political conservatism seem unsurprising. It's important to note, however, that this tendency to transform society into a version of the family also appears in contemporary works less committed to old-fashioned realism than those by Franzen or Eugenides, including Dave Eggers' metafictional memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000); Aimee Bender's fabulistic *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (2001), and—perhaps most surprisingly—the dystopian satires of George Saunders' *Pastoralia* (2000).⁴⁷ This focus on the family is particularly unexpected in Saunders' work because he explicitly parodies the idea suggested by the title of Hillary Clinton's chapter on economic policy: "Every Business is a Family Business."⁴⁸ Late in *Pastoralia's* title novella, whose main characters reenact the lives of cave dwellers at a historical theme park, we see a memo from management reminding workers "that we are a family, and you are the children ... and ... that we, in our own way, love you."⁴⁹ The truth, however, is clearly that the relationships between workers, bosses, and customers are antithetical to the more selfless relationships between friends and family in the text; indeed, the narrator's bosses eventually pressure him into betraying his less-competent co-worker in the name of protecting his family, and as the story ends, he and his new partner are locked in a fierce competition, each going to absurd lengths to prove their dedication to the role of cave dweller, as if downward pressure has reduced them to acting like actual primitives.

Business isn't family in "Pastoralia," then, and yet the only alternative to business in the text *is* family, or rather the act of treating your fellow workers like family. We glimpse this alternative when the narrator reflects on how his father used to help cover for his own less-competent partner at a meat-packing plant, acts of personal kindness that were eventually repaid when the co-worker gives the narrator's mother a check for a thousand dollars following her husband's death.⁵⁰ This flashback hints at a blue-collar past when workers could afford to be more generous because their lives were less precarious than in the dystopian near-future of the story's present. What's conspicuously absent from this historical image is the type of collective action that helped make this prosperity possible, namely union organizing and political mobilization, the type of action that requires workers to embrace the concept that they are participants in an impersonal, antagonistic structure. Of course, such an omission

can be read in a number of ways, including as an attempt to dramatize, with critical intent, the limits of our contemporary political imagination. Readers' attitude about this omission will likely turn, moreover, on whether they think labor movements are still relevant now that America's working classes are more likely to be found in places like theme parks and strip clubs (setting for "Sea Oak," the collection's other workplace satire) than manufacturing plants.

Still, it's worth underscoring that in "Pastoralia," with the narrator unable to reproduce his father's kindness and with no collective action in sight, the only hope for these characters is that their bosses really *do* start treating workers like family, that they start to mean it when they say "we love you."

"PUT A FAMILY IN THERE. MAKE IT FALL TO PIECES."

Even Ben Marcus, contemporary literature's most high-profile advocate for experimental fiction, places the nuclear family at the center of his novels, including the novel that was most current at the time of his debate with Franzen. As one early reviewer noted, Marcus's *Notable American Women* (2002) and *The Corrections* actually tell a very similar story: "the universal tale of a family struggling to reconcile its shared sense of disappointment and resentment" or, as Marcus himself puts it, the story of "the family and the family gone wrong."⁵¹ This is yet another convergence that seems to contradict the terms of the authors' debate, as we would expect Marcus to stand up for his own "kind of reader"—those who, like him, hate to see "literary tradition so warmly embraced and coddled"—precisely by rejecting such traditional subject matter, which he elsewhere describes as the "foremost subject matter" in American fiction.⁵² But, whereas the "Experimental Fiction" essay suggests that his "kind of reader" is not "better" than Franzen's, merely different, the genesis of this novel suggests that his kind of reader is not even different: including the family in *Notable American Women* allowed Marcus to give "the reader ... those moments that are considered more traditional, or at least more anchored."⁵³ As he explains, "in searching for ways to bring emotion to the book, placing a family at the center of it was like taking a shortcut toward emotionality. Thinking, *I need emotion here. Where can I find it?* Put a family in there. Make it fall to pieces."⁵⁴

Nevertheless, if Marcus's family-focused emotional "shortcuts" seem to further blur the distinction between his priorities and those of Franzen, they are also central to his meditation on narrative form – another (less oppositional) way of understanding the "experimental." By incorporating the domestic storyline in a fictional world defined by

depersonalization, Marcus allegorizes a conflict intrinsic to contemporary literature: the conflict between the personalizing logic of post-postmodernism and the “impersonal” tendencies of experimental writing. Most famously associated with T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” with its insistence that writing poetry be an escape from “personality and emotions,” the term “impersonality” can also be used to describe the idea that writers should ignore the emotions, values, and expectations of *readers*, the position that Franzen attributes, in caricatured form, to William Gaddis.⁵⁵ Of course, as many critics have suggested, postmodernism itself can be understood as a rejection of this modernist aloofness toward readers, whether because the opposition between art and the marketplace has been called into question or because readers are now seen as the true source of literary meaning. In the latter sense, postmodernism is said to reflect—like a great deal of contemporary cultural theory—a celebration of the personal, “the particularity of one person’s perspective.”⁵⁶ Still, in seeking to distinguish contemporary fiction from its predecessors, we need to recognize the differences, not just the continuities, between the triumph of “subject positions” and the triumph of the personal, just as we need to recognize the differences, not just the continuities, between the New Left and neoliberalism.⁵⁷ More to the point, to understand Marcus’s place in literary history, we need to situate his work in the context of (and as a response to) a postmodern novelistic tradition that performed avant-garde “impersonality” in its own distinct ways. As Rachel Greenwald Smith has noted, for example, “Postmodernist works...tended to minimize the affective pull of the individual by emphasizing that artificiality,” as postmodernism “saw an insistence upon the artificiality of the subject as a form of critique.”⁵⁸

Marcus stages the conflict between these aesthetic and theoretical commitments and the ideals of post-postmodernism—with its vision of literature as fragile collective of thinking, feeling selves—by setting the “traditional” family narrative in a world filled with strange technologies and experiments, mostly dedicated to “emotion removal.”⁵⁹ These physical and discursive techniques—“strategic fainting,” the head stuffed with cloth, the “stillness equipment” in the “stillness shed” among others—are often deployed as corrective devices by the novel’s parent characters, fictionalized version of Marcus’s own parents, who relate to their son as if they were the experimentalist novelists and *he* were the experimental text.⁶⁰ If the goal of innovative writing is to produce work in which “language has pushed at its limits,” the parents’ goal for their son is that his “language apparatus” will produce “unprecedented utterances. New words, old words said newly, nonwords, sounds. Maybe something else.”⁶¹ Taken together, these two objectives—new words, but also “emotion removal”—suggest a desire to replace the language of “emotionality” with a language of detachment, a

language just as clinical as this mother and father's attitude toward their own child. Indeed, this movement from the interpersonal to the impersonal seems to be implicit in the very logic by which Ben Marcus (the flesh-and-blood novelist) invented these fictional technologies, all of which appear to be grounded in the *literalization*, *formalization*, and *materialization* of various metaphors and associations concerning language, writing, and speech. In this sense, these devices not only represent the desire for formalization (and the painful feeling this desire can generate in families) but also enact it.

The most obvious and, perhaps, most important of these concepts is the female cult of "Silentists," a plot element that seems to represent the literalization of a common metaphor about the role women have played in public life and in the writing of history: that they have been "silenced." Indeed, Marcus has said the book took its name from an example of that metaphoric silencing: "The title does reference an actual set of women's histories that, in their early edition, were begrudging and condescending."⁶² The trope of the cult of Silentists also seems to represent, meanwhile, the formalization of this metaphor, in which these historical acts of silencing have been transformed into Silentism, a creed and a code of conduct embraced by both women and (to a lesser extent) men. Furthermore, as part of this reinvigoration of silence—what Marcus describes as his "reparatory action," his attempt to respond to those early women's histories by depicting "glorious and graceful, highly fantastical" women's lives—the notion that silence is 'good for you' has been materialized.⁶³ On one hand, interpersonal communication is now *physically* bad for you, generating concepts like "speech wind – an early form of menacing weather."⁶⁴

On the other, silence is now a kind of desirable body type, to be achieved through the modification of the body itself. Speech, feeling, and shared feelings happen in the mouth, brain, and ears; therefore the "head is decentralized" by stuffing it full of cloth, or through a "a diet meant to feed and promote silence, limit motion, and restrict hearing to an-all vowel repertoire."⁶⁵ An "all-vowel repertoire" is better because "vowels indicate pleasure and consonants indicate pain and confusion."⁶⁶ As the narrator explains, "experiences of intercourse were free of consonants" – in other words, vowels are bodily sounds of pleasure and thus have a kind of mindless objectivity, even if they fall short of pure silence, while consonants are the sounds of two disconnected subjects forced to resort to actual speech.⁶⁷ That is, the narrator ("Ben Marcus") associates speech with others' disappointment in his love-making, precisely the kind of messy "emotions" the book fantasizes about replacing with the impersonal pleasures of head-stuffed bodies, efforts which merely confirm the centrality of emotion to the book's project.⁶⁸

As this analysis suggests, moreover, in the process of reading what is at root a generic coming-of-age story—filled with common childhood traumas like adolescent sexuality, seeing one’s parents fight, even the death of a pet—the reader must decipher the most basic presuppositions of Ben’s narration, as if learning the facts and norms of a whole new world. By thereby mixing the “emotional” and the conceptual, instead of simply proceeding with his initial vision of the book as the “set of missing entries for this scholarly project of women’s histories,” Marcus transforms what would have been an instance of a familiar postmodern genre, the “secret” or “alternate” history, into something that seems generically distinct.⁶⁹ In this sense, Marcus’s novel, like *The Marriage Plot*, *Pastoralia*, and *The Corrections*, reminds us why the literary critic interested in what comes after postmodernism must also be interested in the varieties of neoliberalism: the intersection of left-liberal commitments with the personalizing disavowal of antagonism (the triangulation sparking renewed focus on affective and ethical social relations) generates not just new political forms but also new literary forms, like an “experimental” novel in which “emotionality” emerges as a touchstone.

“FAMILY IS HOW I MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD.”

Of course, the most significant of these new forms might be the very debates that structure this essay – “the realists” versus “the experimentalists,” “Reaganism” versus the “communitarian renaissance response to Reaganism.”⁷⁰ These debates ultimately reflect consensus, not conflict: Franzen’s comment that “Family is how I make sense of the world” is, as we’ve just seen, equally likely to come from the mouth of an “experimental” novelist as a “realist,” and just as likely to be endorsed by a Democrat as a Republican.⁷¹ Contemporary literary study has its own ways of participating in this consensus, and I will conclude by suggesting that such criticism actually makes it more difficult, not less, to recognize the connections between neoliberalism and culture. To put this another way, I want to suggest that if the discipline of literary study is going to continue to imagine itself—as it often does—as a critical alternative to mainstream political discourse, then contemporary scholars must reflect critically on their own relationship to neoliberal orthodoxy.

In “Neoliberal Family Matters” (2013), to pick a particularly relevant example, Susan Koshy reads Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) as a “quietly devastating critique” of the discourse that defines family values—specifically the “parenting norms” of the Asian-American “model minority family”—as the source of immigrant class mobility and intergenerational accumulation.⁷² Koshy writes that “one of the searing

ironies of the collection is that an inheritance so orchestrated around accumulation should in the end come to be felt as an inheritance of loss.”⁷³ In this sentence, we see a slippage similar to the kind in *The Corrections*, the conflation of one type of structure, that of material “accumulation” and “loss,” with another, that of “identity and belonging.”⁷⁴ The latter is what Koshy has in mind, in fact, when she refers to “loss.” That is, what the characters in Lahiri's stories have ‘lost’ is a sense of personal agency and cultural membership; they are neither as empowered nor as comfortable (as “Asian” or “American”) as neoliberal discourse says they should be. As I suggested above, however, the differences between these two structures must be kept in focus: material accumulation by one class requires material loss by another, while “identification” by one group does not *require* alienation by another. Indeed, Koshy argues that a sense of “loss” can be the very *basis* for its own form of identification: “[Lahiri] reads this attenuated agency not as a lack, but as the ground of an ethico-aesthetic politics of tangentiality.”⁷⁵

In this sense, by Koshy's reading, Lahiri's text seems to reproduce, rather than “critique,” one of neoliberalism's fundamental rhetorical gestures: the substitution of a structure in which gains require losses with a structure in which it is possible (if not inevitable) for *everyone* to gain. This is the theoretical work achieved by the concept of human capital, which re-imagines the market as a space comprised *only* by capitalists, rather than a structure made possible by the very tension between capitalists and workers, and which redefines psychic gain as equivalent to material gain (and thus a compensation for material loss). In this way, even as it projects a world of ubiquitous “competition”—everyone a capitalist—neoliberalism may also “hold on to the notion that everyone is a winner, a notion clearly at odds with competition because in competition there are winners and losers.”⁷⁶ What follows from this re-imagining of the marketplace is, moreover, a re-imagining of government (and the Democratic Party): instead of protecting the “losers” inevitably produced by capitalism from its “winners,” government's role is to encourage businesses, families, individuals, and the state to “partner” together so that, indeed, everyone is a winner.⁷⁷

It seems clear by now, however, that not “everyone is a winner,” materially speaking, under this mode of governance, and that (the equally important corollary) not everyone is a loser. Neoliberalism has precisely not been “cruel” (contra Lauren Berlant) to America's financial elites: since the mid-1970s, income and wealth inequality have intensified, and the “economy has functioned decreasingly well, but for the wealthy ever more satisfactorily.”⁷⁸ If symbolically resolving such contradictions is central to the neoliberal project, it follows that these contradictions must also be central to any attempt to understand the relationship between neoliberalism and culture. This

means literary critics must avoid relying on accounts of neoliberalism that also obscure these contradictions, as when neoliberalism is characterized in terms of its threat to “identity and belonging” or its counterproductive “fantasies of the good life,” characterizations which suggest that changes in social norms could override these tensions between economic winners and losers.⁷⁹

Indeed, by locating the cause, effect, and modes of resistance to neoliberalism on the level of subjective or affective attachment, such work seems to ultimately reproduce the left-liberal, values- and empathy-based politics I’ve been describing throughout this paper. Whether or not one is convinced by these critical visions, it’s important simply to note that they don’t really depart from the reigning political consensus about life under capitalism. To imagine alternatives to this view, one would have to imagine a politics that insists on the impersonality of these structures of accumulation and loss, a politics concerned not with whether the “wealthy few” care about the “unwealthy many,” but with making this question irrelevant, with ensuring the “wealthy few” share their wealth whether they feel a “sense of connectedness” or not.⁸⁰

NOTES

¹ Jonathan Franzen, "Mr. Difficult" In *How to Be Alone: Essays* (New York: Picador, 2002, 2003), 239; Ben Marcus, "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction." *Harper's Magazine*, October 2005, 39.

² Franzen, "Mr. Difficult," 240.

³ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁴ Marcus, "Experimental Fiction," 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51. For a discussion of how Marcus invokes the term "experimental," see Paul Stephens, "What Do We Mean by 'Literary Experimentalism?': Notes Toward a History of the Term," *Arizona Quarterly*, 68, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 143-173.

⁷ James Wood, "Abhorring a Vacuum." *New Republic*, 15 October 2001, 32. "Why Bother? (The *Harper's* Essay)" culminates in a "realization that my condition was not a disease but a nature ... I was a *reader*." Jonathan Franzen, "Why Bother? (The *Harper's* Essay)" In *How to Be Alone*, 94, 95.

⁸ Franzen, "Mr. Difficult," 241.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁰ For a relevant discussion of what the question of the autonomy of the work of art means in a neoliberal "world where everything is (and if it isn't, should be) a market" see Nicholas Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption Under Capital." *Nonsite.org*, 13 March 2012, <http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital>. For an account of the way that contemporary aesthetic "compromise" signals participation in the neoliberal turn, see Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics." *The Account: A Journal of Poetry, Prose and Thought* 3 (2014),

<http://theaccountmagazine.com/?article=six-propositions-on-compromise-aesthetics>.

For my response to this essay, see "Conflict before Compromise: A Response to Rachel Greenwald Smith," *The Account: A Journal of Poetry, Prose, and Thought* 4 (Spring 2015), <http://theaccountmagazine.com/?article=forum-on-compromise-aesthetics#BrooksLink>.

¹¹ Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, 1975, 1993), 112. See also Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 226. As Michel Feher notes, "human capital" theory reflects an expansion of "the capital concept as traditionally defined," including an expanded understanding of "both input (not only education but parental and social influences, lifestyle choices, etc.) and output (not only monetary earnings but satisfactions of all kinds." Michel Feher, "Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital." *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 26-27.

¹² Bill Clinton, "Text of President Clinton's Announcement on Welfare Legislation." *The New York Times*, 1 August 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/01/us/text-of-president-clinton-s-announcement-on-welfare-legislation.html?pagewanted=all>; Becker, *Human Capital*, 112.

¹³ On Franzen's neoliberalism, see Walter Benn Michaels, "Going Boom," *Bookforum* (February/March 2009), http://www.bookforum.com/inprint/015_05/3274; Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Plutocratic Imagination," *Dissent* 60, no. 1 (Winter 20013), <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-plutocratic-imagination>; Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 6-11, 33-37. On Marcus's work as an alternative to a neoliberal aesthetics, see Smith, *Affect and American Literature*, 89-94.

¹⁴ *Remaking America: Democracy and Public Policy in an Age of Inequality*, ed. Joe Soss, Jacob S. Hacker, and Suzanne Mettler (New York: Sage Foundation, 2007), iii.

¹⁵ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 272.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 289. Indeed, it turns out that the market's "built-in tension" is not a tension between social groups but between, in Clinton's account, "the drive to satisfy consumers' demands by maximizing productivity and profitability" and the needs of "the workers and families who are, after all, those very consumers," (289). By internalizing conflict in all these ways—by making it a function of a lack of family values in poor people or in business owners, or by framing it as a conflict between a consumer's own demands and needs—Clinton is able to ignore the collective, structural antagonism that tends to overdetermine these individual expressions of love and (ir)responsibility. Thus, while Clinton doesn't explicitly *deny* the existence of class—unlike Santorum, her Republican foil, who remarked during the 2012 Presidential primary that "There are no classes in America."—class has little explanatory power in her account. Rick Santorum, "2012 ABC/Yahoo!/WMUR New Hampshire GOP primary debate." *The Washington Post* January 7, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/post/2012-abc-yahoo-wmur-new-hampshire-gop-primary-debate-transcript/2012/01/07/gIQAk2AAiP_blog.html.

¹⁷ Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village*, 273, 5. This political context is why Bill Clinton's comment during his 1992 Presidential nomination speech that deadbeat dads need to "take responsibility for your children ... Because governments don't raise children; parents do," is the corollary, not the contradiction, to Hillary's argument that "It takes a village to raise a child." Bill Clinton, "A New Covenant" (Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York City, July 16, 1992), *Putting People First: How We Can All Change America* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 221.

¹⁸ Colin Hutchinson, "Jonathan Franzen and the Politics of Disengagement," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 50, no. 2 (2009): 202, 204.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 200

²⁰ Garth Risk Hallberg. "Why Write Novels at All?" *The New York Times*, 13 January 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/magazine/why-write-novels-at-all.html?_r=0.

²¹ David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram. Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 181.

²² Jeffrey Eugenides, "The Father of Modernism," *Slate*, 17 June 2004, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/features/2004/the_father_of_modernism/the_father_of_modernism.html, emphasis mine.

²³ Tom LeClair. *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 14; Mark McGurl. *The Program Era. Postwar Fiction and Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 57; Wallace, "E. Unibus," 180.

²⁴ David Foster Wallace, "Octet", in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: Stories* (New York: Little Brown, 1999), 125.

²⁵ Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2011), 31.

²⁶ Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) and Walter Benn Michaels's *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* are the most influential of these accounts. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004). For a more recent analysis of the way that a commitment to the importance of "subject position" tends to foreclose a confrontation with the conflicts intrinsic to globalization, see Emilio Sauri's "Cognitive Mapping, Then and Now: Postmodernism, Indecision, and American Literary Globalism." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, no. 3-4 (2011): 472-491.

American postmodernism's political commitments have often been compared to those of the New Left movements of the 1960s and '70s (see, for example, DeKoven and McCann, Szalay). Many political scholars have argued that these New Left movements were different from yet in some ways preparatory for the rise of the neoliberal consensus – see, for example, Duggan, Fraser, and Reed – and I think there is a similar relationship between postmodernism and the self-conscious post-postmodernism that began to emerge in the 1990s. Both aesthetic modes can be defined by their disavowal of economic and ideological antagonisms, through which they resolve otherwise irresolvable conflicts, but this disavowal is performed in different ways. Postmodernism does so – in brief – by transforming material conflicts into cultural conflicts and by transforming ideological disagreements into differences in subject position, that is, into the *product* of our positions within structures of meaning, a logic that suggests our disagreements would dissolve if our positions changed (or if the structures themselves changed). As I suggest above, contemporary fiction performs these disavowals by personalizing, rather than systematizing, such conflicts. See Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*

(Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, “Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking after the New Left,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 18, no. 2 (2005): 435-468; Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003); Adolph Reed, Jr., “Nothing Left: The Long, Slow Surrender of American Liberals,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 2014, 28-36; Nancy Fraser. “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review* 56 (2009), <http://newleftreview.org/II/56/nancy-fraser-feminism-capitalism-and-the-cunning-of-history>.

²⁷ Stephen J. Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (London: Continuum, 2008), 23.

²⁸ Both pro-family discourse and communitarianism embrace “the supremacy of the market as they promote decentralized forms of collectivity distinct from the state.” James DeFilippis, Robert Fisher and Eric Shagge, *Contesting Community: the Limits and Potential of Local Organizing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 100. For analysis of the convergence between family-values discourse, communitarianism, and Clintonian politics, see also Janice Peck. *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2008), 111-125, and Judith Stacey, *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 54-55. For critiques of the way that “community” is deployed in post-Reagan political discourse, see Charles Derber, “Coming Glued: Communitarianism to the Rescue,” *Tikkun*, July/August 1993, 27-30, and Tony Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies* (London: SAGE, 2010).

²⁹ Stacey, *In the Name of the Family*, 5. The inauguration of this discourse is commonly dated back to 1965, with Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Stacey, 5); by 1976, moreover, the Republican party had made “family values” part of its national platform – see Robert Stone, “Family Values in a Historical Perspective,” (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Harvard University, 15-17 November 1994), <http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/s/Stone95.pdf>, 68-69. I would suggest, however, that we might identify 1992 as the moment when this discourse came to define the political mainstream for the first time, as that year “family values” was a key campaign issue for *both* Republicans and Democrats. Peck, *The Age of Oprah*, 111-125; Stacey, *In the Name of the Family*, 52-82.

³⁰ David Haglund, “Yes, Jeffrey Eugenides Was Thinking of David Foster Wallace,” *Slate*, 10 October 2011, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2011/10/10/jeffrey_eugenides_david_foster_wallace_jonathan_franzen_and_the_.html.

³¹ Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, 22, 79.

³² *Ibid.*, 67.

³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁵ Yasmin Nair, “Against Equality, Against Marriage: An Introduction,” *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage*, ed. Ryan Conrad (Lewiston ME: Against Equality

Publishing Collective, 2010), 4-5. Nair notes that “AIDS activism in the 1980s called for universal health care, the demand for which has been abandoned by the gay mainstream in favor of the idea that gays should simply be given health care via marriage” (2). In this sense, marriage equality can be described as “a stripped-down, nonredistributive form of ‘equality’ ... compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources,” (Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, xii).

³⁶ Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village*, 291. As of 2017, the most visible difference between how Hillary Clinton and Santorum understand “family values” concerns same-sex marriage: unlike in 1996, Clinton now believes gays and lesbians should be free to marry, while the most famous fact about Santorum is his hostility to LGBT rights. Another important difference concerns the role of “outside institutions,” including federal government programs, which Clinton argues are necessary to “strengthen families” so they can “raise strong children and to protect themselves from influences that threaten to undermine parental authority” (291). In Santorum’s account, these institutions do not strengthen families but weaken them, along with other “intermediary institutions” like those literal, old-fashioned villages still defined by “the town line.” As he puts it: “The warm, fuzzy image of Senator Clinton’s book is that of a community rich in social capital, but the truth of the matter is that liberal policies which tie individuals to the government break the bonds of true community and deplete social capital,” (Rick Santorum, *It Takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Good* [Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005], 67).

This difference has translated into political disagreements over legislation like the Family and Medical Leave Act, which Bill and Hillary Clinton championed – it was “the first bill my husband signed into law as President, on February 5, 1993” – but which Santorum voted against as a member of Congress. Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village*, 78; “February 03, 1993, Vote 22,” The U.S. Congress Votes Database, (*Washington Post*), 1996, <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/congress/103/house/1/votes/22/>. Designed to compel companies to allow “good workers to be good family members,” this legislation guarantees workers at large companies the right to take unpaid leave “in order to care for a new child, a sick family member, or their own serious health condition, without losing their health benefits or their jobs” Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village*, 78. This federal intervention into the marketplace has had a major impact on workers’ lives, but it should nevertheless be understood as a refinement, not a critique, of the basic logic of that marketplace. This is not simply because of the FMLA’s limits (the guaranteed leave is unpaid, and it is only guaranteed for full-time workers at large companies), but because of its very goals. As Clinton’s phrasing suggests, legislation like the FMLA will be especially beneficial to “good workers” – employees with plentiful “human capital” who will no longer be discriminated against (in effect) for having needy family members. But such policies don’t speak to the basic contradictions of neoliberalism, according to which such “good workers” may get ahead even if (and some would say *only if*) ‘bad’ workers (those with less valuable human capital) fall behind.

³⁷ Santorum, *It Takes a Family*, 10.

³⁸ Bill Clinton, "Welfare".

³⁹ Wood, "Abhorring a Vacuum," 36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 38. On the "post-postmodernism" of Franzen, the novelist who (along with Wallace) critics turn to most frequently to define this term, see, for example: Burn, *Jonathan Franzen*; Madhu Dubey, "Post-Postmodern Realism?" *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, no. 3-4 (2011): 364-371; Adam Kelly, "Beginning with Postmodernism." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, no. 3-4. (2011): 391-422; Robert L. McLaughlin, "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World," *Symploke* 12, no. 1-2 (2004): 53-68; and Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, no. 3-4. (2011): 423-446. For relevant further discussion of Franzen's political vision, see Ty Hawkins, "Assessing the Promise of Jonathan Franzen's First Three Novels: A Rejection of 'Refuge,'" *College Literature* 37, no. 4 (2010): 61-87; Caren Irr, "Postmodernism in Reverse: American National Allegories and the 21st-Century Political Novel," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, no. 3-4 (2011): 516-536.

⁴¹ Jonathan Franzen, "Conversation: Jonathan Franzen," *PBS News Hour*, 30 September 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/art/conversation-jonathan-franzen/>.

⁴² Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 444. By way of contrast, we can look to *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985) by William Gaddis, the writer Franzen singles out for his most sustained critique of postmodern fiction. This novel provides a natural counterpoint to *The Corrections*, in the sense that both texts dramatize how even the private space of a single family home is permeated by the geopolitical. What's striking about *Carpenter's Gothic* is the tension between what Gaddis could (and, by expectation, *should*) be doing to tell his story of global political conspiracy – narration of multiple settings, multiple time-periods, and multiple personal histories – and what he actually does, which is to keep the narration confined to one place (a house on the Hudson) and one short period of time; just as importantly, rather than relaying memories or personal histories, the narration confines itself to relaying dialogue, physical action, and subjective impressions that don't quite rise to the level of internal monologue, creating the sense that one is constantly in "the present," in both space and time. The aesthetic tension these choices create suggests a structural tension between the events that take place in the house and the neocolonial intrigue that happens outside it, especially since these external events are constantly invoked in the dialogue without ever being fully explained, meaning the reader is constantly attempting (and never quite succeeding) to decipher this broader context (until, for the main character at least, it is too late). This tension is absent from *The Corrections*, because Franzen does what Gaddis does not – narrate multiple places, times, and personal histories (albeit all focused around one nuclear family) – and because he ultimately suggests that the substance of these family relationships is identical to the substance of these public relationships. It is by virtue of this transubstantiation that the family

resolution is able to stand in for (and as) a resolution to the book's geopolitical conflicts. William Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic* (New York: Elizabeth Sifton Books, 1985).

⁴³ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 444.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 540.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 563, 546.

⁴⁶ From a perspective that insists on class antagonism, the structural tension between “Dale Meyers,” manager of a three-billion-dollar “no-load growth fund” in eastern Iowa, and the people of Lithuania (whose national airline is liquidated after Meyers buys and sells its fleet) is not reducible to a drama of “consciousness” and “identifying marks,” as a person’s position within the “wealthy few” or the “unwealthy many” will shape the trajectory of their life whether they affirm that membership – as Chip does with his family – or not. Nor can these class tensions be understood in terms of a failure of empathy or “mutual responsibility.” From a perspective that insists on class antagonism, the conflict between Dale Myers and the people of Lithuania is an impersonal, internal requirement of accumulation itself: “the wealthy few” *must* “subdue” the “unwealthy many,” or they will no longer be “the wealthy few.” Whatever acts of charity are made possible by the ability to “imagine how hard another person’s life was”—like Denise Lambert’s decision to forgive her brother Chip’s \$20,000 debt (after she discovers her ailing father has made his own sacrifice on her behalf)—must take place within the limits sketched out by this structural necessity. *Ibid.*, 112, 524.

⁴⁷ Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), for example, dramatizes the author’s attempts, following the sudden death of his parents and the adoption of his younger brother, to create a supportive community of like-minded young cultural consumers, a “lattice” that is explicitly figured as an extended family, connected by “blood.” Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 237, 339, 436. Bender’s *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (2001), meanwhile, uses the story of 20-year-old math teacher struggling to come to terms with her father’s mysterious mental illness, in order to explore conflicts between individual fulfillment, family membership, and the public relationships of adulthood. The stunted young woman, Mona Grey, achieves a level of independence from her family by the end of the novel, but this process is narrated in a fabulistic style that seems to transform the adult world of Mona’s future into an extension of the fairy-tale world of her childhood. Aimee Bender, *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (New York: Anchor, 2001).

⁴⁸ Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village*, 265.

⁴⁹ George Saunders, *Pastoralia* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 48.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

⁵¹ Andy Battaglia, Review of *Notable American Women, The A.V. Club*, 17 April 2002, <http://www.avclub.com/review/ben-marcus-inotable-american-womeni-6084>. Ben Marcus. “How can one word from Ben Marcus’ rotten, filthy heart be trusted?” (Interview), *PowellsBooks. Blog*, 10 October 2006, <http://www.powells.com/post/interviews/how-can-one-word-from-ben-marcuss-rotten-filthy-heart-be-trusted>.

⁵² Marcus, “Experimental Fiction” 52; Marcus, “How can...”.

⁵³ Marcus, “How can...”.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ T.S. Eliot. “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, et. al.(New York: Norton, 2001), 1097; Marcus, “Mr. Difficult”.

⁵⁶ Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism’s Other Work: The Art Object’s Other Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 178.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁵⁸ Smith, “Six Propositions.”

⁵⁹ Ben Marcus, *Notable American Women* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 45.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 74, 117, 152, 158.

⁶¹ Marcus, “Experimental Fiction,” 51; Marcus, *Notable American Women*, 232. At the same time, like Henry James, the only real obligation that Michael and Jane Marcus place on their “art” (“the art of the launch,” or child-rearing) is that it be “interesting.” Ibid., 223; Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, et. al. (New York: Norton, 2001), 859. Ben fails to meet this obligation, however, and even his failure itself is not an “interesting” failure: “Ben’s failure has not proved challenging, surprising, mysterious, complicated, difficult, alarming, or exciting,” (Marcus, *Notable American Women*, 212). Marcus (the real-life author) also evokes this Jamesian tradition in his “Experimental Fiction,” essay, which suggests – like “The Art of Fiction” – that novelists should be as free to experiment as poets and other artists. To defend difficult novelists, he points to “any number of poets not tied to obedient or recognizable structures of sense and form,” and he suggests that innovative writers work with language “as a painter might with color, as a composer might with sound, as a dancer might with movement.” Of course, as in “The Art of Fiction” essay, this demand for formal freedom has often included declarations of the irrelevance of the values, expectations, and emotions of the reader. As I suggest above, Marcus is working within and in response to this tradition when he dramatizes the problem of how to balance such indifference with an interest in interpersonal human relationships. Marcus, “Experimental Fiction,” 50, 52.

⁶² Ben Marcus, “Interview,” *Failbetter.com.*, Spring/Summer 2001, <http://www.failbetter.com/03/Marcus.htm>

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Marcus, *Notable American Women*, 77.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 77, 65.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid. It may seem counterintuitive to link the privileging of vowels and physical “intercourse” over consonants and verbal intercourse with an attempt to privilege the impersonal over the interpersonal, since the affairs of the body seem distinctly linked to the particular and the affairs of language seem distinctly linked to the abstract; in other

words, it seems that you could make the opposite argument, that in these lines interpersonality is being privileged over impersonality. I think the logic of the passage in question supports the first reading, but of course my larger point is that the book is animated by the very *tension* between these poles.

⁶⁹ Marcus, "Interview." For influential accounts of postmodern literature's treatment of history, see Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History," in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. P. O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3-32; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 21-25; 364-376; Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), 84-96.

⁷⁰ Colin Hutchinson, "Jonathan Franzen," 192.

⁷¹ Jonathan Franzen, "Conversation."

⁷² Susan Koshy. "Neoliberal Family Matters," *American Literary History* 25, no. 2 (2013): 355, 346.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 373

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 374.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 373. Here we see hints of what Madhu Dubey has described as postmodern cultural studies' "romance of the residual," in which a "structural position of relative powerlessness" is converted into a "desirable ontological condition" and "aesthetic appreciation comes to compensate for and thereby mystify the realities of material suffering." Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 8-9.

⁷⁶ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 57.

⁷⁷ Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village*, 270.

⁷⁸ Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence* (London: Verso, 2006), xxviii; Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, "Inequality in the Long Run," *Science* 344 (2014): 838-843.

⁷⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

⁸⁰ Franzen, *The Corrections*, 444; Franzen "Mr. Difficult", 240.