Double Bind:

Essays on David Foster Wallace and his fans

by

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Contents

Summary

In 2018, author Mary Karr tweeted about her abusive relationship with David Foster Wallace. This was at the height of #MeToo and cancel culture, where the phrase 'problematic fave' was commonplace. Wallace, dead for ten years but still alive in the public imagination, was suddenly brought into the conversation. Wallace's fans, too, were implicated in his bad behaviour, emphasising their reputation for being 'lit-bros'. This thesis, a collection of six essays on Wallace and his fans, reckons with his complicated legacy. We all have our problematic fave. What do we do about it?

This thesis moves through online, academic, and fan communities to show how these worlds feed into each other and into movements like #MeToo and cancel culture. Reflecting the breadth of each essay's content, my approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on postcritical literary theory, theories of social psychology, feminist, cultural, fan, and, of course, Wallace studies. With a matter as charged and subjective as your problematic fave, personal experience is an inevitable and useful source of information. My experience as a reader and fan of Wallace is the through-line of these essays. Reading Wallace helped me recover from my eating disorder, and, consequently, my attachment to him and his work is strong. Across this thesis, I reassess my relationship to Wallace, accounting for my responsibilities as a woman, a scholar, a fan, and an active member of the fan community.

In one of Wallace's interviews, he claimed that: 'Interesting and true stuff in my life seems to involve double-binds, where there is a decision between two alternatives, but neither is acceptable'.[1] As a thematic frame for this collection, the double bind captures the emotional and intractable complexity of choosing whether or not to keep loving and endorsing our problematic faves. The double bind feels irresolvable, thereby leaving a productive tension in issues that we want to insist are black and white. In embracing this tension in these essays, I conclude that the double bind is not the problem, but my answer to whether I can still love Wallace.

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[1] Wallace qtd. in Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays,* ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), pp. 131-47 (p. 138).

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. I also certify that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed

Grace Chipperfield

Acknowledgements

Although it can sometimes feel with a PhD that you spend 5+ years by yourself in a room, just you and your computer, the reality is that this thesis would not exist without the support and guidance that many wonderful people have given me, not to mention the funding I received from a variety of sources without which this project would never been written.

Lisa, Kate and Kylie: thank you for being my supervisors, mentors, readers, and friends. At different times over the course of my degree you have each stepped up to help me move forward not only with this project but also in terms of my professional development, giving me advice and opportunities for which I continue to be thankful. In hindsight, changing my project at the start of 2019 was drastic, and I'm so grateful that you let me run with it, while keeping me on track. Your guidance and feedback have made me a better researcher and writer.

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In 2017 I was awarded a Fulbright postgraduate scholarship that enabled me to live in the US for 11 months in 2018. The funding I received from the Australian American Fulbright Commission was generous and it still blows my mind that I was given this opportunity. This wasn't, in the end, the project they funded, but I think it's an informal hope of the program that you come away from your experience changed, with new knowledge and new perspectives to incorporate into your research, and I hope they'd be pleased to know that the Fulbright did change my life and therefore what I ended up writing.

As part of my Fulbright experience, I was lucky to audit graduate courses at both The University of Texas, Austin, and Illinois State University. I am hugely thankful for the writing and intellectual generosity of my classmates, and for my professors—Randy Lewis, Gretchen Murphy, Jim Cox, Christopher Breu—who changed my worldview and taught me well.

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side of the globe. Imogen, Jemima, Laura: thank you for providing all kinds of support in all kinds of ways, and for taking an interest (however real or forced) in what my PhD project was about and how it was going. Julie: I met you in E384K and the moment you said you were also a Wallace fan I knew we were going to be friends—I treasure you. Nina: you are a magical person. I'm so glad we were in Ricardo's workshop together and that I continue to benefit from your wisdom and your way of looking at the world.

I lost both my grandparents over the course of this degree—my papa only a week before submitting. They have always been supportive of me and I know they'd be pleased to hear that I finished the thing. Nana and papa: I miss you. Thank you for everything you've given me, material and otherwise, to help me along my way.

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Marie: you've been with me since 2014, and in a big way this thesis and the story I'm trying to tell starts with you and our first session together. Thank you for all your compassion, humour, wisdom, and support for the past 6+ years. I wouldn't be where I'm at today if it weren't for you.

Cat and Ryan: thank you both for your friendship and for being with me through this whole weird PhD journey thing. Cat: I'm so proud of you for graduating and doing the good work you're doing. Ryan: it has been an honour to do my PhD alongside you. I'm looking forward to graduating together.

I'm lucky to be part of two excellent writing workshops, the members of which generously read my work and provided intelligent and thoughtful responses that improved the essays in this collection. To Alicia, Emma, Lauren, Mel, Peter and Piri (a.k.a. The Baes): thank you for your friendship, for reading my work and giving valuable feedback, and for being wonderful people in general. To the 2010 Creative Writing Crew: it took COVID-19 for us to get our shit together, but it's been a highlight of this final year to be back workshopping with you all.

In 2016 I found a community of people who have since become very dear to me. They are the reason this thesis is what it is, and I'm constantly amazed by their warmth, their intellectual generosity, their hard work and their collective and individual brilliance. It's been a total privilege to work with them on the boards of the DFW Society and the Wallace journal. Andrea, Alex, Allard, Ashlie, Clare, Corrie, Danielle, Dave, Diego, Dominik, Nick, Matt L., Mike, Rob, and even the MIA Tony: thank you for welcoming me into the group and for everything you do for the community.

Matt Bucher: these essays wouldn't exist if it weren't for you and your involvement in the Wallace community. Thank you for coming up to introduce yourself at DFW17, and for being an important part of my life ever since. I am grateful for and to you.

There are too many folks who make up the wider Wallace community to thank by name here. A big, impersonal but sincere thank you to everyone who I've had the pleasure of meeting by virtue of our shared love of Wallace, and who've been willing to share their stories with me for this thesis. This community is overwhelmingly generous in all manner of ways, and it's an honour to have been welcomed into it.

And finally: thank you, David Foster Wallace.

Dedication

These essays are dedicated to the Wallace community.

To the reader of these essays:

Author here. Meaning me, Grace. I am the real, living human typing these words, and I'm the person who's going to be with you for the next six essays, also typed (revised, rewritten, despaired over) by me. This kind of meta-intrusion by the author into the thing you are reading isn't new or exciting, obvs. If anything it's derivative—the first two sentences of this introduction are a bastardised form of something David Foster Wallace wrote in his final, unfinished novel *The Pale King*. However, I want to directly address you, and introduce myself (hey!), because whatever your stance on authorial intent or keeping the artist separate to the art, this thesis/essay collection will ask you to suspend your disbelief and come with me down a rabbit hole.

There is a scene that will be laid out for you many times over the course of these essays. The scene is this: in 2018, author Mary Karr tweeted about her abusive relationship with David Foster Wallace. This (the tweeting, not the relationship) was at the height of #MeToo and cancel culture, where the phrase 'problematic fave' was commonplace. Wallace, dead for ten years but still alive in the public imagination, was suddenly brought into the conversation. Wallace's fans, too, were implicated in his bad behaviour, emphasising their pre-existing reputation for being 'lit-bros'. At the time that Karr tweeted, I was living in Austin, Texas, on a Fulbright postgraduate scholarship that was allowing me to do, among other things, archival research on Wallace at the Harry Ransom Center nearby. Essentially, and you'll read about this in greater detail in the essays that follow, Karr's tweet changed my life. Well, it changed my thesis project, which at the time felt more or less like the same thing. The product of this change is the collection of essays you have before you now, all of which, from some angle or other, reckon with Wallace's complicated legacy and the impact it's had on his fans. We all have our problematic fave. What do we do about it?

This collection moves through online, academic, and fan communities to show how these worlds feed into each other and into movements like #MeToo and cancel culture. Reflecting the breadth of each essay's content, my approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on postcritical literary theory, theories of social psychology, feminist, cultural, fan, and, of course, Wallace studies. With a matter as emotionally charged and subjective as your problematic fave, personal experience is an inevitable and, I think, useful source of information. My experience as a reader and fan of Wallace is the through-line of these essays. Reading Wallace helped me recover from my eating disorder, and consequently my attachment to him and his work is strong. Across these essays, I reassess my relationship to Wallace, accounting for my responsibilities, in light of his problematic status, as a woman, a scholar, a fan, and an active member of the fan community.

The title of this collection refers to something Wallace once said in an interview. He claimed that: 'Interesting and true stuff in my life seems to involve double-binds, where there is a decision

between two alternatives, but neither is acceptable'.[2] As a thematic frame for this collection, the double bind captures the emotional and intractable complexity of choosing whether or not to keep loving and endorsing our problematic faves. The double bind feels irresolvable, thereby leaving a productive tension in issues that we want to insist are black and white. In embracing this tension in these essays, I conclude (spoilers) that the double bind is not the problem, but my answer to whether I can still love Wallace.

Before we get into more of the nitty gritty: first, a word on the form. As far as creative writing theses go, this one's an odd duck. Traditionally the creative writing PhD comprises a critical exegesis that contextualises a creative artefact or novel-length work. I've instead mixed these two parts together, so what you have now is a collection of essays that are both critical and creative. Although I don't think this is a particularly earth-shattering choice to have made (the essay is a form that's been blending these together for a long time) nor a very smart choice to have made (as far as proving the research that has gone into these essays, it has felt at times that I chose to do a PhD in literature rather than creative writing) the genre of the creative writing PhD is established in such a way that this explanation is necessary to prepare you for what follows. This preface functions as a more formal mini-exegesis, but each essay will do similar work, in terms of contextualising itself as part of the broader project.

In her introduction to *Touching Feeling* (2003), Eve Sedgwick writes that her book's form, also a collection of essays, emerged because her project 'with increasing stubbornness, refused to become linear in structure'.[3] 'No doubt,' Sedgwick says, 'the ambition of thinking other than dualistically itself shaped the project's resistance to taking the form of a book-length, linear argument on a single topic'.[4] Sedgwick writes that although we're often encouraged to think non-dualistically about things, very few people provide models for how to go about doing so; 'it's far easier to deprecate the confounding, tendentious effects of binary modes of thinking,' she argues, 'than it is to articulate or model other structures of thought' (she adds that to even invoke nondualism is to fall into the dualistic trap).[5] I agree. My frustration with, or concerns about, binary thinking are pretty bluntly articulated in my first essay: 'Sorry, David Foster Wallace is cancelled' (more on which soon). And I chose the essay form, or the form chose my project, for the same reason as Sedgwick's; the essay allows me to be non-linear and to roam where I like. In doing so, it helps me be as non-dualistic as possible, and to model other possible structures of thought that I think we are very much in need of— the models of thought, that is, rather than my specific way of thinking, of course. And even though I obviously have my own stopping point with these essays, the non-linearity also allows you, the

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[2] Wallace qtd. in Kelly, p. 138.
[3] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 1.
[4] Sedgwick, p. 1.
[5] Sedgwick, p. 1.

reader, to make your own connections, to make up your own mind, without me funnelling you towards a predetermined end.

Leading on from this, the essay was a form (especially in the kaleidoscopic way I've used it here) that allowed for certain themes, issues, and ideas to be left adjacent to each other, rather than me exhaustively connecting everything I said to everything else. I felt this made the writing more honest. The information we receive day to day, no matter how we corral it, doesn't arrange itself well, or at all, into a linear structure for us. Shoehorning in explicit step-by-step connections between, say, Wallace and cancel culture and critique and fandom, would've been possible but not super organic and, taking a reader's perspective for the moment, I'd wager pretty dull to read. I think these things can say more about each other by being adjacent, and I wanted to trust my reader to see how these apparently disparate things interact; for example, in the final essay, 'What it's like in David-Foster-Wallace-land,' there's no explicit connection between #GamerGate and Wallace, and yet, as I hope you'll come to see, they are linked. Likewise, the largely and, on face value, widely different issues under discussion in this collection—the language of critique, feminism, the pressure on female bodies, the myth of genius, all of which I discuss more below where I outline each of the essays—are intentionally left adjacent to each other, though they can all be understood together and separately as being tied to patriarchal structures, which are a looming, immanent presence over this entire collection. We are all products of our culture, and culture is diffuse. Bits of information may appear to be discrete, but they are not. And when it came to writing about Wallace, the only way I could see to take in the whole picture was to let go of silos and of linearity, and to definitely give up on finding a straightforward solution.

And finally, what I love about the essay is that it can be personal. The essay, as I've mentioned, is an excellent and established form for blending the critical and the creative, for pairing big-picture ideas and critical concepts with the personal, the subjective, and the experiential. The essay can contain both the world and the individual, giving weight to each and showing how these things are never divorced from each other.[6] When you read the second and third essays, 'Authority and Academia (I) and (II),' I talk about the limitations of scholarly writing (my line of reasoning here is drawn from the work being done by postcritical scholars in literary studies—again, more on which soon) and how it feels impractical for me to write about Wallace and pretend to be objective,

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[6] For more on these sorts of ideas, I'd highly recommend checking out: Joe Moran, 'Walking with a Purpose: The Essay in Contemporary Nonfiction', *Textual Practice,* 32 (2018). Moran describes how this form, made popular by the likes of Maggie Nelson, Annie Dillard, Rebecca Solnit, Eula Biss, and others, is 'generically hybrid, associative, poetically inflected, and rooted in both the concreteness of the world and in metaphysical and ontological questioning'. He makes some super interesting points about the 'essayistic spirit,' the form of the essay today, and the kind of engagement it solicits from the reader. Moran argues that '[i]n contrast with the polarised certainties of post-Internet public discourse, [the essay] is intrinsically unfanatical . . . [including] elements of refracted, incomplete autobiography in a way that offers an elliptical corrective to our age of oversharing and emotional unrestraint. In an electronically mediated culture, it is drawn to the non-virtual and sensual, demanding a sustained engagement with its own unique attempt to make sense of the real'. (p. 1277) This is the kind of sustained engagement I hope to encourage in the essays collected here.

especially when I'm writing on highly charged and, like, *big* issues such as #MeToo, which are at once both public and private, political and personal. Moreover, as you will see, the response to Wallace has frequently, and especially in 2018, been primarily affective, and so it seemed to me that I'd be having an entirely separate conversation about Wallace if I weren't to engage in the same way. The essay has proven to be a fun and flexible, though never easy, form in which to write about Wallace and his fans—I hope this translates to your experience reading them.

One other thing. You may notice that, for a Wallace scholar, I spend little time closely reading Wallace's work and I don't draw heavily on the wonderful scholarship that has been produced in Wallace Studies.[7] This is because my approach is 'zoomed out' from this sort of literary analysis— it is, in some ways, peripheral to what I'm writing about. Instead, I've been more focused on the cultural vibe around Wallace. I'm less interested in the narrative structure of *Infinite Jest* and way more obsessed with the guy who wrote it.

And so, to purloin the track title from an Oh Pep! song: 'What's the deal with David?' And, furthermore, what's the deal with his fans? D. T. Max, in a preface to the UK edition of his biography on Wallace, writes that 'Wallace approached his subjects in a more personal, more intense way. And the intensity of this engagement was what held his readers in such thrall'.[8] Max notes his surprise at the number of readers who attended a memorial at New York University after Wallace's death in 2008, wondering 'what to make of the young men and women, dozens of whom swelled the audience . . . for whom Wallace was not just a favorite writer but nearly their only writer?'[9] These readers, Max adds, 'approached the status of groupies. Some have Wallace's words tattooed on their bodies.[10] They talk about their favorite passages of his writing. "So, yo, then man, what's *your* story?" they like to say, quoting *Infinite Jest*'.[11] Max realises 'how deeply people read their own lives in Wallace's,' and suggests their attachment to him is because these readers 'identify with his genius, his depression, his anxiety, his loneliness, his frustrations, his early success, his amazement that the world isn't gentler, and his upset at how hard it is to say what you mean. They know or intuit his struggles'.[12] Max says that Wallace's 'life and fiction were connected in a unique way,' and that Wallace 'had wanted to make his readers consider how to engage with the world, how to live well in a difficult time. A moral project lay behind all those gorgeous sentences, those endlessly recursive thoughts, that tendency to annotate and caveat every utterance that became his signature'.[13]

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[7] But if you're keen to explore Wallace Studies, check out the Glasgow David Foster Wallace Research Group, 'Bibliography of Secondary Criticism'*,* (2019). Available at: https://davidfosterwallaceresearch.wordpress.com/
[8] D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, (London: Granta, 2013).
[9] Max.
[10] The DFW Society has actually made a call for pictures and descriptions of peoples' Wallace tattoos around the world. The information gathered from this is in the process of being made into an interactive Google Map for fans to see who has what tattoo in which part of the globe.
[11] Max.
[12] Max.
[13] Max.

Max's description offers a convenient snapshot of the concerns that underlie this essay collection: Wallace's literary celebrity; the hagiography following his death; his fans and the nature of their devotion; the easy conflation of Wallace's personal life with his work; and, finally, the moral project that apparently lay behind his writing. A moral project that becomes hard to swallow wholesale post-2018, once Mary Karr tweeted about Wallace's abusive behaviour.[14]

I would add to this list the easy conflation of Wallace and his fans. Maybe this is true of most fan communities, but as far as online opinion goes Wallace fans seem popular only among themselves. Post-2018 this is hardly surprising, but this unpopularity was the case before Wallace's reputation ended up in the bin. Pre-2018, Wallace fans were unbearable lit-bros—white, bearded dudes for whom *Infinite Jest* acted as a totem of their intelligence, and who took every opportunity they could to mansplain why you should like Wallace and why, if you didn't, you were wrong. Or so the legend goes. As Kelsey McKinney wrote in a 2015 article for *Splinter*, 'Wallace couldn't communicate with me directly, but his fans certainly could, and they were assholes . . . They were the type of men who call themselves feminists but assault women. They were politically and vocally progressive liberals who were actually misogynists, and I could barely read *Infinite Jest* over the roar of their thoughts'.[15] Post-2018, the whole lit-bro aspect of the Wallace fan's reputation was amplified; the annoying, casually sexist aspects of that stereotype took on a more sinister, misogynist pall.

So what's a girl to do? Especially one that's a rabid fan of David Foster Wallace? The essays that you're about to read are meant to provide some kind of response to this, even if they can't offer a straightforward answer. Like any elevated cultural thing, everyone's got their take on Wallace. When Karr tweeted, there were defences (some blind, some 'woke', some scholarly) of Wallace, there were boycotts, there were accounts (some nostalgic, some sheepish, some defiant) of 'recovered' fans who'd 'outgrown' Wallace,[16] and there were stories told, good and bad and ambiguous, about people's personal experience of the man while he lived. One of these stories is Adrienne Miller's 2020 memoir, *In the Land of Men*.[17] At the end of 2018, I was yet to work out where, in this deluge of opinion, I fit. I've sort of taken Miller's route, although I've never met Wallace, because the issues that I want to talk about in relation to Wallace are complicated and often I don't know how to say

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[14] This abuse was recorded in the Max biography but, for reasons that I'll go into elsewhere in this collection, the full import of Wallace's behaviour was not realised until years later, owing both to the aforementioned hagiography after his suicide, and the changing cultural context that changed also how his behaviour registered in 2018.

[15] Kelsey McKinney, 'How One Fan Completely Transformed My View of David Foster Wallace', *Splinter,* (2015) <https://splinternews.com/how-one-fan-completely-transformed-my-view-of-david-fos-1793849718> [accessed 27/3/19].

[16] See, for example: Julius Taranto, 'On Outgrowing David Foster Wallace'*,* (LA Review of Books, 2018); Devon Price, 'A Brief on Hideous Things About David Foster Wallace', *Medium,* (2018) <https://medium.com/@devonprice/a-brief-on-hideous-things-about-david-foster-wallace-72034b20de94#:~:text=A%20Brief%20on%20Hideous%20Things,Wallace%20%7C%20by%20Devon%20Price%20%7C%20Medium> [accessed 5/8/2020].

[17] Adrienne Miller, *In the Land of Men: A Memoir*, First edition. edn (New York: Ecco, An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2020).

anything definitive about them, and beyond that (and reasonably or unreasonably) I don't feel authorised, despite my research, to say anything definitive about them—the only authority I have is in my own experience and so that is what I've chosen to record. Well, that and the research.

Writing on Miller's memoir, Zan Romanoff recounts her own experience of reading Wallace in her twenties, and how he changed her life. Romanoff says that when she picked up *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, Wallace's essay collection, she was 'at the time, nursing an extraordinarily bad heartbreak, and desperate for anything else to absorb my attention'.[18] Wallace's essays allowed Romanoff to escape herself; she says he offered her 'a new perspective on the pain [she'd] been wallowing in,' by introducing her to 'the literature of recovery'.[19] In many ways, Romanoff and I have the same story to tell. I came to Wallace in my twenties, at the peak of my eating disorder and anxiety, and he too offered me a new perspective on where my head was at, and, as you'll read about in the fourth essay in this collection, 'How David Foster Wallace helped me with my eating disorder' (it'll do what it says on the tin), reading Wallace was also a part of my recovery process. Romanoff is, I think it's fair to say, one of the fans who outgrew Wallace, and so this is where our stories diverge. But her assessment of both her own experience of Wallace and Miller's memoir are germane to the larger project of this thesis. Romanoff admits that, by the time Karr tweeted, her 'love affair with Wallace's work' had cooled, for which she is grateful, in that it didn't put her in the position where she had 'to decide how to feel about a book [she] had loved and a man [she] could no longer countenance'.[20] Romanoff 'put Wallace on the shelf along with a lot of bad ideas [she'd] had in [her] early twenties'.[21]

Miller, on the other hand, does grapple with Wallace's legacy (albeit her memoir is not solely about Wallace but, rather, her experience of the publishing industry more generally). She asks: 'What are we to do with the art of profoundly compromised men?'[22] And she too has 'no answers'.[23] The only partway answer she can offer is that, as regards Wallace being good or bad, he is, like most of us, 'both'.[24] I didn't love Miller's book, but what I appreciate about her approach is its acknowledgement of the complexity and personal nature of asking these sorts of questions. And whatever reservations I have about her memoir, her experience is hers and there's no negating that—this is also, I hope, the case for the essays you're about to read here (the personal bits, at least).

Romanoff recognises herself in Miller's ambivalence. Whatever her opinion of Wallace's abusive behaviour (which is, by the way, a resounding 'that's fucked') she can't forget reading Wallace, and she can't disavow the way he's shaped her as a person. She writes: 'I don't know how to

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[18] Zan Romanoff, 'The Fraught Task of Describing Life with David Foster Wallace', *Literary Hub,* (2020) <https://lithub.com/the-fraught-task-of-describing-life-with-david-foster-wallace/> [accessed 8/4/2020].
[19] Romanoff.
[20] Romanoff.
[21] Romanoff.
[22] Miller, p. 323.
[23] Miller, p. 323.
[24] Miller, p. 324.

be the person who didn't find his books at 22. Maybe she's smarter, cooler, a better feminist than I am, but that doesn't matter—I simply don't *know* her'.[25] Hard same. Reflecting on Miller's memoir, Romanoff concludes that the most 'effective strategy for dealing with the art of profoundly compromised men . . . is to tell our own stories about them, solely and insistently from our points of view'.[26] This kind of account, she says, asks of these men 'that they exist in relation to us for a while, instead of believing that we are required to exist always, and only, in relationship to them'.[27]

So what kind of accounts do my essays provide?

The first essay, 'Sorry, David Foster Wallace is cancelled,' addresses Karr's 2018 tweets, the #MeToo movement, and the whole 'problematic fave' thing head on. Part of examining the fall-out from Karr's tweets has involved looking at Wallace's legacy across the entirety of his writing career, and the memorialisation/hagiography of him after his death in 2008. Wallace's fall from grace was particularly long and brutal, I argue, because for a long time he'd been hailed as 'Saint Dave,' a moralistic and good person. This saintly image was reinforced by the media, which in its own way enabled his abusive behaviour to be glossed over, despite it being public knowledge. There's also a conversation to be had about Wallace's genius, another part of his legacy that, coupled with the saintly stuff, fed into our idea of him as a tormented artist, therefore making his problematic behaviour just part of the whole suffering genius archetype. I end the essay with a discussion of call-out and cancel culture, and the implications that this has had for fans of Wallace and the community that has formed around his work. This is perhaps the crux of the essay; I don't think it's up for debate whether Wallace's abusive behaviour is excusable or not (it isn't) but the climate in which conversations about these issues is being had is, I think, potentially problematic itself.

Wallace voiced a similar concern in his foreword to the 2007 edition of 'The Best American Essays'. He used this foreword to explain the process by which he'd curated the collection, which was in part a response to the 'Total Noise that's . . . the sound of our U.S. culture right now, a culture and volume of info and spin and rhetoric and context that I know I'm not alone in finding too much to even absorb, much less to try to make sense of or organize into any kind of triage of saliency and value'.[28] He described this Total Noise as an emergency. 'Part of our emergency,' he said, 'is that it's so awfully tempting to . . . retreat to narrow arrogance, preformed positions, rigid filters, the "moral clarity" of the immature'. 'The alternative,' one that's not so much unappealing as unapproachable, 'is dealing with massive, high-entropy amounts of info and ambiguity and conflict and flux; it's continually discovering new vistas of personal ignorance and delusion. In sum, to really try to be informed and literate today is to feel stupid nearly all the time, and to need help'.[29] Thirteen years

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[25] Romanoff.
[26] Romanoff.
[27] Romanoff.
[28] David Foster Wallace, 'Introduction: Deciderization 2007—a Special Report by David Foster Wallace', in *The Best American Essays* ed. by Robert Atwan (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), pp. xiii-xiv).
[29] Wallace, p. xxiii.

later and the Total Noise volume has only been turned up. To try to be informed and literate today is still, in my experience, to feel stupid nearly all the time and to need help.

Cancel culture adds a whole new level of stress to feeling stupid and getting things wrong. Not to mention the mental whiplash that comes from the speed at which opinions, attacks, and counterattacks can be published and shared widely online. The consequences nowadays for showing your ignorance is not only a reality check but also public shaming and condemnation. To say even this feels fraught.[30] My discomfort and uncertainty about how to be informed and how to speak (not to mention the ambient pressure *to* speak, even if you'd rather hold back for whatever reason) about what we think we know is the question at the heart of the first essay in this collection.

With the second and third essays, 'Authority and Academia (I) and (II),' I retreat from the online world of hot-takes into the cloisters of academia, where opinion is produced and circulated at a slower pace. Rather than finding refuge in the nuance and complexities of scholarship, however, I use these essays to articulate my frustration with the gap between academia (specifically the work that literary studies scholars do) and the public. These essays are about the crisis of faith I had in academia back in 2018, when the career I'd devoted myself to seemed to be ill-equipped, in my view, to deal with what was happening online, especially as regards Wallace and #MeToo. My frustration, I think, is part of a larger crisis in the humanities, which is itself part of a debate around our scholarly practices and the question of why and if literary studies matters, can be relevant, can deal with matters of urgency, so on and etcetera.

With this in mind, 'Authority and Academia (I)' traces, in broad strokes, this pattern of crisis in academia. This crisis is related to the corporatisation of universities, intellectual fashions, and the shitty job market for newly minted academics, but more specifically, within the discipline of literary studies, I want to draw attention to the Theory era, and the subsequent death of Theory, the crisis in critique, and the recent turn to postcritique, because these things inform how I've tried to hack literary studies to deal with the Wallace problem. Postcritique is an approach to literary criticism that pays attention to readers and their reading experiences. It values subjective and emotional responses to what we read, in contrast to the dominant mode of critique, which prizes objectivity and detachment and that can't, in my view, account for, say, the deeply personal way in which fans read and attach to Wallace's work and the man himself. Having a better understanding of this kind of attachment would, I think, expand the conversations we might have about Wallace and his problematic status.[31] I wanted

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[30] And it is fraught. Just recently there's been a whole debate about cancel culture and freedom of speech and persecution. You can follow the trail by seeing the following: 'A Letter on Justice and Open Debate', *Harpers Magazine,* (2020) <https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>; 'A More Specific Letter on Justice and Open Debate', *The Objective,* (2020) <https://theobjective.substack.com/p/a-more-specific-letter-on-justice>; Hannah Giorgis, 'A Deeply Provincial View of Free Speech', *The Atlantic,* (2020) <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/07/harpers-letter-free-speech/614080/>; Jennifer Scheussler, 'An Open Letter on Free Expression Draws a Counterblast', *The New York Times,* (2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/arts/open-letter-debate.html>.

[31] Other scholars are beginning to experiment with this kind of postcritical approach to Wallace, too. See, for example: Nathan Moreau, 'Describing the Surface: David Foster Wallace and Postcritical Reading', *New*

to find a language of literary criticism that was appropriate to the kinds of conversations we were having about Wallace—conversations that were, as I earlier mention, primarily affective—and to challenge what seemed (maybe still seems) to be an immanent contemporary belief that a cynical and detached position is a more informed one. For this, and for my project, Felski's work is a good fit.

However, surprising no-one, there are also counterarguments to postcritique. One ongoing debate is about the limitations, and possibly even the ethical dubiousness, of postcritique, particularly as universities capitulate to the forces of neoliberalism and as we embed ourselves more deeply in a 'post-truth' world. So this is also something I address.

'Authority and Academia (II)' builds on the preceding essay, but things get more experimental here. Written as a series of letters addressed to female scholars, writers, and readers who've informed this project, I try to fully engage with the spirit of postcritique, to come at literary studies and the debate around critique vs. postcritique (and the Wallace problem) from a different critical and affective disposition. Letter-writing, as I discuss in 'David Foster Wallace is my friend,' the fifth essay in this collection, has traditionally been thought of as a 'feminine' form,[32] and so I have intentionally used this form as a counterbalance to traditional scholarship which tends to valorise a rhetorical and affective style that we've learned to associate with masculinity (e.g. rationality, detachment, objectivity, and one-upmanship). This seemed important to do for several reasons, not least that issues of gender and misogyny are central preoccupations of this essay collection. The letters also help me approach concerns that are both personal and relevant to the scholarship I produce, and they were, finally, a way to give thanks to the women who've totally reshaped my worldview in the writing of these essays.

The fourth essay in this collection is another experiment in putting postcritique into practice by attending to my experience of reading Wallace. The very literal title, 'How David Foster Wallace helped me with my eating disorder,' tells you what this essay is about. But built into this account is a discussion of formative fictions, the uses of literature and what reading can actually do for the reader. The reader experience is an area of literary studies that I think merits more attention, and I think my story goes some way to explaining why I am a Wallace fan, and why disavowing him in light of the allegations of abuse is not a straightforward matter.

The fifth essay, 'David Foster Wallace is my friend,' is a series of letters written by me to David Foster Wallace. The letters focus on the writer-reader relationship, a concept that Wallace spoke about often, and one that his readers tend to take to heart. Taking this relationship seriously, then, my letters are, in their own way, love letters, and it is in this essay I decide (sometimes playfully, sometimes seriously) whether to 'break up' with Wallace or not. My one-sided conversation

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Critique, (2020) <https://newcritique.co.uk/2020/08/01/essay-describing-the-surface-david-foster-wallace-and-postcritical-reading-nathan-moreau/> [accessed 23 August 2020].
[32] Anna Watkins Fisher, 'Manic Impositions: The Parasitical Art of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle', *Women's Studies Quarterly,* 40 (2012), 224.

with him ranges from feminist parasites and Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*, to parasocial relationships and authorial personae, to Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism, as well as drawing on the work of other Wallace scholars who've also written on this writer-reader relationship. Across these letters and their various subjects, I tease out my relationship to Wallace and his work, deliberately conflating Wallace the man with his authorial persona, collapsing any distance between the two into a single addressee.

With this in mind, although the overviews of the other essays so far have been somewhat brief, there are two disciplinary debates that I want to address here so that you can enter this essay with your disbelief firmly suspended. There is the wider debate in literary studies about the death of the author, and the strain of scholarship in Wallace Studies that focuses on Wallace as the harbinger of a kind of literary movement described as 'New Sincerity'. The former is well-known in literary studies—Roland Barthes's essay 'The Death of Author' being pretty much required undergrad reading—so I won't exhaustively rehash his argument here except as it pertains to Wallace. The latter requires a little more unpacking.

Barthes argues that the author has been put on a pedestal when it comes to interpreting their texts. He writes: '[t]he image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions,' and that '[t]he explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author "confiding" in us'.[33] It's ironic that, 'at roughly the same time as academic criticism was becoming increasingly suspicious of essentialist notions of the individual author,' authorial celebrity was becoming a thing, too.[34] Authors, their personalities and biographies, loomed larger than ever. Not that Barthes was disputing the existence of authors, or the 'common-sense notion that individual authors write texts'.[35] He was, rather, criticizing 'the kinds of mystical associations which cluster around them in capitalist societies, naturalizing them as the only authoritative source of textual meaning and as a locus of power and authority within a culture'.[36] Barthes's goal was to 'de-mythologize the position of the author in relation to the text'.[37] Barthes tells us we should pay more attention to the reader, that the author is the reader's subordinate 'in matters of assigning meaning and determining truth'.[38] He ends his essay with a rousing call: 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author'![39]

It is in this dissonant mix of authorial death and celebrity that Wallace sits. Whether Wallace subscribed to Barthes's argument is unclear and, theoretically, irrelevant, but given the nature of his

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[33] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text,* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), (p. 143).
[34] Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*, (Sterling: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 58-59.
[35] Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*, p. 59.
[36] Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*, p. 59.
[37] Richard Hishmeh, 'Romantic Genius and Literary Celebrity in American Literature'*,* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2005), (p. 44).
[38] Hishmeh, p. 44.
[39] Barthes, p. 148.

celebrity, Wallace was in a position to articulate his intentions for his work in interviews.[40] This puts us less in Barthes territory and more in the vicinity of Wimsatt and Beardsley, and their discussion of the intentional fallacy—this being 'the practice of basing interpretations on the expressed or implied intentions of authors'.[41] Wimsatt and Beardsley think this is an erroneous way of approaching literature, insisting that 'the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art'.[42]

For better or worse, Wallace scholars have not always heeded Wimsatt and Beardsley's advice. In his article, 'David Foster Wallace is not your friend,' (a snappy title I've rejigged for this fifth essay) Cory Hudson writes about the ways in which Wallace has been able to control his reader's understanding of his work and, by extension, him, the author. With the rise of the internet and literary celebrity, we've had an exceptional level of public access to Wallace. This has been crucial to the feelings of intimacy between him and his reader, which can lead to a collapsing or conflation of the artist with his art—a primary focus of this fifth essay. It's also had implications for how we understand his work. Hudson says our obsession with what Wallace said about his own writing is a 'troubling trend'.[43] This 'troubling trend' syncs with the second wave of Wallace criticism—in which scholars defer to his interview transcripts, non-fiction, and personal correspondence to articulate his writing project. Wallace was 'from the beginning a provocative literary critic and sociologist as well as an artist,'[44] and he thought and spoke about his writing as someone trained in a very specifically academic way of thinking about writing. This has lent him a different kind of authority over his work. According to Adam Kelly, although 'the rise of theory was initially viewed as the conclusive destruction of intention, the final nail in the coffin of Roland Barthes' dead author,' the rise of institutionalised creative writing challenged this, and intention was 'birthed again to co-exist with

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[40] For example, in an interview with Larry McCaffery, the one everyone quotes from when they talk about his authorial intentions, Wallace seemed to find Barthes's argument appealing. He said Barthian and Derridean poststructuralism had helped him as fiction writer because it taught him that once he'd written the thing, he was 'basically dead, and probably the text's dead; it becomes simply language, and language lives not just in but *through* the reader. The reader becomes God, for all textual purposes'. But, ever the slippery fish, in a review of H. L. Hix's *Morte d'Author*, Wallace vented his frustrated with these same ideas. He said he found it hard to predict whom, 'besides professional critics and hardcore theory-wienies, 226 dense pages on whether the author lives is really going to interest,' adding, charmingly, that '[f]or those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane'. See: Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Stephen Burn (Jackson: Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21-53; David Foster Wallace, 'Greatly Exaggerated', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 2011), pp. 138-46.
[41] Ross C. Murfin, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 246.
[42] W. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *The Sewanee Review,* 54 (1946), 468.
[43] Cory M. Hudson, 'David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend: The Fraudulence of Empathy in David Foster Wallace Studies and "Good Old Neon"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* 59 (2018), 1.
[44] Adam Kelly, 'Development through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas', *Studies in the Novel,* 44 (2012), 268.

theory, resulting in fresh forms of critical engagement'. [45] Kelly says this shift explains the influence of Wallace's interviews and essays on interpretations of his writing; 'when major writers become willing to engage the discourses of theory itself—to speak the language of the critic and challenge that language on its own turf—it is impossible not to take notice'.[46]

Hudson argues that our fixation on the writer-reader relationship 'has become a much-too-simple default account of [Wallace's] narrative project'.[47] There's an insistence in scholarship that Wallace's writing is driven by his want for a relationship with his reader that is meaningful and reassuring—so that, as he's said, 'the reader feels less lonely'.[48] James McAdams, for example, writes that the 'most persistent and idiosyncratic characteristic' of Wallace's writing 'is its conviction that literature should be empathetic and selfless, generating meaning in the transactional space between writer and reader'.[49] McAdams cites statements from Wallace's interviews that reiterate his 'oft-stated desire to connect with and form an "erotic" bond with the reader,' emphasizing how his 'primary motive was to give the reader something'.[50] McAdams quotes Wallace saying that 'in order to accomplish this objective . . . the author must assume the responsibility to be generous and sincere, thus avoiding manipulating the reader'.[51]

Wallace is, or was for a time, the poster boy for sincerity.[52] Back in 2010, Kelly wrote there was widespread agreement, that had 'by now become almost a cliché among readers, fans, and critics,' that Wallace 'affirmed and embodied sincerity as a crucial value in his life and work, perhaps even as that work's defining feature'.[53] This talk of sincerity begins with, of course, Wallace talking

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[45] Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Critical Reception', in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Philip Coleman (Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2015), pp. 46-63 pp. 51-52).
[46] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Critical Reception', pp. 51-52.
[47] Hudson, p. 1.
[48] Wallace qtd. in David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), p. 31.)
[49] J. McAdams and J. Conrad, '"I Did a Nice Thing": David Foster Wallace and the Gift Economy', *English Studies in Canada,* 42 (2016), 121. By no means do I want to single out this scholar for any kind of judgment. This is merely a representative example of second wave Wallace criticism. And after all, I'm basically doing the same thing here, kind of.
[50] McAdams and Conrad, p. 124.
[51] McAdams and Conrad, p. 121.
[52] There has been a lot written on Wallace in relation to sincerity and fiction, beyond what I've mentioned in this introduction. If you're interested in going down this rabbit hole, you might like to see: Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction '; Lee Konstantinou, 'No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 83-112; Robert L. McLaughlin, 'Wallace's Aesthetic', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Ralph Clare (2018), pp. 159-72; Toon Staes, 'Rewriting the Author: A Narrative Approach to Empathy in Infinite Jest and the Pale King', *Studies in the Novel,* 44 (2012); Lucas Thompson, '"Sincerity with a Motive": Literary Manipulation in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest', *Crit.-Stud. Contemp. Fiction,* 57 (2016); Iain Williams, '(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's "Octet"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* 56 (2015); Thomas Winningham, '"Author Here": David Foster Wallace and the Post-Metafictional Paradox', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* 56 (2015); Kelly Adam, 'David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts', *Orbit (Cambridge),* 5 (2017); J. Jackson, 'White Guys: Questioning Infinite Jest'snew Sincerity', *Orbit : A Journal of American Literature,* 5 (2017).
[53] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 131.

about being sincere—his essay, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', being the earliest artistic manifesto-ish piece in which he called for earnestness to balance the irony that'd become ubiquitous and forceful in the 90s. Even after he described it as out of date with his changing motivations as a writer, this essay was a fan favourite.[54] The belief that his work, that *he*, embodied sincerity and single-entendre principles is one that only gained momentum after his death.

But although sincerity might be a straightforward concept for 'the era of Dostoevsky or the European Romantics,' it's problematic for those of us who were born in the age of television, and who're embedded in postmodernism and all its self-conscious ironies.[55] Wallace once said that any attempt at sincerity nowadays would need to take the effects of all of this into account. He told Charlie Rose that postmodernism had produced a kind of text that was 'highly self-conscious, self-conscious of itself as text, self-conscious of the writer as persona, self-conscious about the effects that narrative had on readers, and the fact that readers probably knew that'.[56] This complicates things. As Kelly points out, if 'a writer must anticipate how his work will be received by readers,' and must focus on 'communicating what sounds true rather than simply what is true, is he really being fully sincere?'[57] Kelly wonders if there isn't 'a schizophrenic and/or manipulative quality at work here that counteracts the good intentions of the artist as communicator of truth?'[58] (And this is something I explore in my essay.) Kelly cites Ernst Van Alphen and Mieke Bal's *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* to point out how 'sincerity as a concept has from the beginning been wracked by this kind of difficulty, has never, in fact, evaded its theatrical connection to a notion of performance'.[59] According to van Alphen and Bal, 'sincerity indicates the performance of an inner state on one's outer surface so that others can witness it. But the very distinction between inner self and outer manifestation implies a split that assaults the traditional integration that marks sincerity'.[60] Kelly says Wallace's fiction explores this double bind of sincerity in the age of postmodernism. He describes this not as sincerity, but as 'New Sincerity'.[61]

Wallace said to David Lipsky that '[t]here is, in writing, a certain blend of sincerity and manipulation, of trying always to gauge what the particular effect of something is gonna be'.[62] Manipulation is a feature, rather than a bug, of all writing. But when it comes to the reader's attachment to Wallace, this bears looking at more closely. The reason readers like me are so fiercely

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[54] See: Steve Paulson, 'To the Best of Our Knowledge: Interview with David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Stephen Burn (Jackson: Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 127-36.
[55] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 134.
[56] Wallace qtd. in Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 134.
[57] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 135.
[58] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 135.
[59] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 135.
[60] Ernst Van Alphen and Mieke Bal qtd. in Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 135..
[61] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 136.
[62] Wallace qtd. in Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 140.

attached to Wallace, and so reluctant to disavow him despite his problematic status, is because most of us, I'd wager, feel like he's our friend, whatever you take that to mean. It is also this relationship that accounts for the very real sense of betrayal many readers experienced when they were made aware of Wallace's abusive behaviour, either in the 2012 biography or through Karr's tweets.

So with these debates about the death of the author and the intentional fallacy and Wallace's 'New Sincerity' in mind, let it be said that the fifth essay in this collection is an intentional withdrawal from them. My letters to Wallace are a way for me to play out what it means to conflate the artist with his art, and to take as gospel the intentions he declares he has for his work and for the relationship he cultivates with his reader. This act of conflation is, I feel, worth taking to both its logical extreme and conclusion, given that many anti-Wallace opinion pieces online (even some scholarly articles)[63] also conflate the man and the writer, in service of their arguments. I don't mock this conflation in my essay; I'm far too predisposed to do the same and Wallace has, in many respects, courted such a conflation. I think there's value in working through how this conflation affects the discussion we have about Wallace now that in many circles he's been deemed problematic, and this is the overall agenda behind 'David Foster Wallace is my friend'.

The final essay in this collection, 'What it's like in David-Foster-Wallace-Land,' wrests the narrative away from Wallace himself and instead faces outward and onto the fan community that has formed around his work. The aim of this final essay is to challenge the stereotype of the Wallace fan, while also demonstrating the ethical and social value of the community that continues to read and celebrate his work, despite his problematic status. Across the collection, you will notice that the focus on Wallace decreases, while the focus on his readers increases. I intentionally end the collection on this essay because I want to counter—or perhaps, more accurately, displace or decentre—the legacy of one problematic man with the legacy of his readers, a legacy no less complex but one that is, overall, very positive. One facet of this, as I cover in detail in this essay, is how Wallace's work and the community that has formed around it has helped many people with their recovery (from alcohol, depression, PTSD, in my case an eating disorder, and so on).

Hanif Abdurraqib, author of the 2019 essay collection, *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest* (to which the overall spirit of this essay collection pays homage), thinks that fans deserve as much attention as the artist they love. Trying to understand and articulate this persistent and ongoing love is especially important in an age where we're finding it hard to separate artist from art, and in which we're not comfortable reckoning with artists' flaws. Though his book 'urges fans to learn how to be comfortable *not* understanding their favorite artists,' Abdurraqib's essays also invite the reader to think more on the fans themselves: 'what are *their* cultural contexts, their experiences, their intents?' Abdurraqib's work 'asks how and why we love artists, and what we can do with that

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[63] See, for example: Amy Hungerford, 'On Refusing to Read', *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* (2016).

love'.[64] This love can be problematic and overbearing, in the case of the lit-bro, but this love can also be generative and ethical, as described above.

To wit: in 'What it's like in David-Foster-Wallace-Land', I provide a history of Wallace fandom and look at how this community is itself part of Wallace's legacy, for better or worse. In doing so, I discuss the stereotype of Wallace fans (that pesky lit-bro) and the anti-fans of Wallace's work. This essay is written using the collective 'we,' even though I wasn't a fan of Wallace in 1996, when our story begins. I've used this voice to emphasise the continuity and collective memory of fan communities. However, I want to make it clear also that I don't and can't speak for all Wallace fans— and anyway, many people who love Wallace and/or his work and/or this community might get defensive about being labelled a fan, given its historically condescending connotations—and what I think I know about the community is necessarily limited to my experiences and to what other members of the community have generously shared with me of their own stories. I don't really know what it was like to be on the wallace-l listserv in 1996; I can only approximate this through researching the archives and talking with other community members. My modest aim with this essay is to, per Abdurraqib's recommendation, pay attention to the fans of Wallace themselves, and to provide a broad strokes overview of the community, to give shape to something that has otherwise been quite distorted, in my view, by people who are only familiar with the stereotype of a Wallace fan. Members of the Wallace community have kindly reviewed this essay for me and based on their feedback I trust that it does the work it needs to do. Though not written in the epistolary form, like the preceding essay, this final piece is pretty unashamedly a love letter to the community, of which I am an active member and which I do, well, love. The community is the main reason I don't want to have to 'give up' Wallace; it has come to mean more to me than, or at least as much as, Wallace himself.

But my love for Wallace and his fans isn't, I hope, totally blind. In his interview with Nawal Arjini for *The Nation*, Abdurraqib talks about the political responsibility of a fan being to challenge their ongoing and persistent attachments to the thing they love, and to evolve accordingly.[65] With that in mind, this final essay also looks at how Wallace fandom has evolved, or stalled, over the years. In doing so, I aim to be a politically responsible fan in relation to Wallace, to myself, and to this community.

I can tell you now (you may have already guessed) that if you've come to this collection expecting definitive answers, conclusions, opinions, solutions, etc., then you're going to be let down. I don't have answers, I only have more information for your consideration. But by the end of the sixth essay I hope you see that that's kind of the point. I did start writing these essays with the intention of rescuing Wallace, his work, and his fans, from the wrong side of history. The options available to me

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[64] Hanif Abdurraqib, 'How to Be Critical of the Things You Love', ed. by Nawal Arjini (The Nation, 2019). For the full interview with Abdurraqib (well worth a look) see: https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/hanif-abdurraqib-tribe-called-quest-book-interview/
[65] Abdurraqib.

at the time seemed to be wholesale condemnation or a defensive quietism that could be read as complicity in, or acceptance of, his abusive behaviour. But in questioning my attachment to Wallace, over the course of these essays, my perspective shifted and the desire to defend him fell away. I could feel myself changing as I wrote, and for this I was glad. My biggest ambition for this collection is that some version of this experience can be delivered to my reader, too, whatever that looks like, whatever your feelings on the matter by the end. Oh of course I still love Wallace, and of course I still absolutely find his behaviour wrong and harmful. But that's the bind I'm in.

Sorry, David Foster Wallace is cancelled

Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, is two-ish hours away if you take the train from Chicago. Amtrak will glide you through flannel-plains and the polished green beginnings of summer cornfields. The sun here glows white and shines a nostalgic sort of haze over the horizon. When you arrive, it will be into Normal's Uptown Station. You will know you have arrived by the feel of the air-conditioning and the smell of Subway bread wafting from the store inside the terminal. Normal has a small but cosmopolitan Uptown that connects to its Downtown sister city, Bloomington. At the northern limit of Uptown a section of the Constitution Trail stretches out, a mostly straight line on mostly flat ground, flanked by maple and oak trees and other foliage. People jog. They ride bikes. There are red northern cardinals and chipmunks and bunnies and squirrels darting about. In 2014 Normal won the Bronze Level Bicycle Friendly Community Award. Branching off the Trail is suburbia. Smooth, concrete cul-de-sacs and sidewalks wend their way along neat green lawns out the front of grey houses that are reproductions of each other. You will see mailboxes with flags, some of them painted with The Flag. Sometimes a flagpole in the front yard. Sometimes a God Bless America sign. The kinds of houses you can raise kids in. The kind of neighbourhood you can raise kids in. The kind of place you can receive an education. Normal is home to Illinois State University, and, if you're interested to know, 174 miles of sanitary sewers, as well as 17 parks.[66] As at 2010, the population was 52,497.[67] There is a small movie theatre Uptown that shows a diverse line-up of classic and more obscure or straight-out bonkers films like the 1977 *Hausu*. In 2011 Normal won the National Award for Smart Growth Achievement (Civic Places). This place is, it has been said, all but recession-proof.[68]

But depending on the circles you run in, you may know that Bloomington-Normal, IL, boasts something far more attractive to visitors than all the above combined: this is where David Foster Wallace lived, taught, and wrote a chunk of his magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*. Bloomington-Normal is thus a place of very particular pilgrimage for some folks.

Every summer for the last six years, the annual David Foster Wallace conference has been held in Normal. And every summer, scholars, students, and fans make the journey to this town. Over two to three days, we meet, we talk about Wallace, we eat Panera Bread and Monical's pizza, we catch up with friends that are scattered across the country and the globe, we present our papers, we talk in corridors, we attempt (once and never again) to re-enact Eschaton with neon plastic rackets and ping

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[66] Town of Normal, 'Community Profile'*,* (n.d.).

[67] Normal.

[68] David Foster Wallace, 'The View from Mrs. Thompson's', in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays,* (repr. London: Abacus, 2007), pp. 129-40 (p. 132).

pong balls on tennis courts that radiate the sun's heat, we drink, until we all pack up and go home and pine for next year's event. People say it's less like a conference and more like summer camp.

Never having gone to (on?) a summer camp, I can only take others' word for it. I have attended the Wallace conference since 2016, when it moved from its comparatively plush Marriott digs to the vaguely claustrophobic classrooms in Stevenson Hall at Illinois State University, where the English department is housed. This is where Wallace taught. There is a glass display case devoted to him on the ground floor, by the elevator. When I came to my first conference ever, here, one year into my PhD, I didn't know just how much my life would come to revolve around this place and these people. I also didn't know that in 2018 everything I had gained from this community in the previous two years would be challenged and up for debate online. I used to think we were a group with such a niche focus that our biggest threat would be irrelevance. If anything, in 2018 we were more relevant than ever, and not in a fun way. Turns out, for a group devoted to David Foster Wallace, our biggest threat was the man himself.

In November 1989, Wallace spent four weeks at McLean Hospital.[69] He was there in rehab, and on suicide watch, after leaving Harvard, along with his studies and second-choice career in philosophy. He'd been struggling to write for a while now—at this time Wallace had published one novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), and a collection of short stories, *Girl With Curious Hair* (1988), along with some other shorter pieces—and had lost faith in his ability as a writer.

Then, Mary Karr came into his life, and he into hers. Wallace met Karr at a party before he entered McLean in 1989. When he left McLean, he saw her again at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in Harvard Square.[70] Karr had seven years on Wallace, was married with a young son, and 'had the stability and the grit that Wallace felt he lacked.'[71]

Mary Karr 'is an award-winning poet and best-selling memoirist. She is the author of the critically-acclaimed and *New York Times* best-selling memoirs *The Liars' Club*, *Cherry*, and *Lit*, as well as the *Art of Memoir*, and five poetry collections, most recently *Tropic of Squalor*'.[72] Karr has won 'The Whiting Writer's Award, an NEA, a Radcliffe Bunting Fellowship, and a Guggenheim. She is also a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *Poetry* magazine'.[73] Karr also had a relationship with Wallace. In an interview for *Lenny*, Lena Dunham asks Karr:

> **[Lena Dunham]:** I was rereading some articles about you, and in every piece, you always get asked about your relationship with David Foster Wallace, despite your

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[69] D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, (New York: Viking, 2012), p. 135.

[70] Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, p. 147.

[71] Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, p. 146.

[72] Mary Karr, 'About Mary Karr', (n.d.).

[73] Karr.

own incredible career. I wonder, does that create rage in you, or do you feel like at this point, it's just a fact of life and you know how to mow past it?

[Mary Karr]: Sometimes people go on and on about David Foster Wallace. As though my contribution to literature is that I fucked him a couple times in the early nineties.

LD: Thank you for your service, Mary.

MK: Thank you. Everybody in America owes me a dollar who read *Infinite Jest*.[74]

The 'me too.' movement began back in 2006, with Tarana Burke.[75] Burke's mission was and remains 'to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing.'[76] The phrase 'me too.' was coined by Burke to give women of colour a way to voice and acknowledge their experiences of sexual violence, and receive empathy from fellow survivors. On October 15, 2017, in response to allegations made against Harvey Weinstein earlier that month, actor Alyssa Milano tweeted that women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted should reply to her tweet with 'Me Too.'[77] The tweet blew up. #MeToo went viral. To prevent her work being accidentally co-opted, diminished, or erased, and to try and shepherd the sharing of trauma stories in a productive and safe direction, Burke stepped up and took her place on the global stage. She has since had to make sure that 'me too.' is differentiated from #MeToo, though the movements share a common goal against sexual violence. Burke says: '#MeToo does not have space for black girls . . . It doesn't have space for black women, it doesn't have space for queer folk, it doesn't have space for disabled people, people of color, trans people, anybody else that's other'. She continues: '#MeToo is about who is going to be taken down next — what other powerful, white, rich man is going to lose his privileges for a period of time'.[78]

#MeToo continues to take down these powerful, white, rich men. For a period of time.

On May 4, 2018, Mary Karr (@marykarrlit) tweeted:

> Deeply saddened by the allegations against #JunotDiaz & I support every woman brave enough to speak. The violence #DavidFosterWallace inflicted on me as a single mom was ignored by his biographer & @NewYorker as 'alleged' despite my having letters in his hand. But DFW was white.

Karr was responding to a tweet by Zinzi Clemmons (@zinziclemmons) from earlier that day:

> As a grad student, I invited Junot Diaz to speak to a workshop on issues of representation in literature. I was an unknown wide-eyed 26 yo, and he used it as an

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[74] Mary Karr qtd. in Lena Dunham, 'The All-American Menstrual Hut'*,* (Lenny, 2017).

[75] Chicago Tribune, '#Metoo: A Timeline of Events'*,* (Chicago Tribune, 2019).

[76] me too., 'History & Vision'*,* (n.d.).

[77] Aisha Harris, 'She Founded Me Too. Now She Wants to Move Past the Trauma.'*,* (The New York Times, 2018).

[78] Burke qtd. in Morgan Greene, '#Metoo's Tarana Burke Tells Local Activists Movement 'by Us and for Us' Must Include Women of Color'*,* (Chicago Tribune, 2018).

opportunity to corner and forcibly kiss me. I'm far from the only one he's done this 2,
I refuse to be silent anymore.

With #MeToo hitting many industries, including publishing, hard, Junot Diaz was the next man-in-power to be called out for harassment. And Wallace, dead for ten years but still alive in the public imagination, was suddenly brought into the conversation. Karr's tweet wasn't the first instance where Wallace's reputation and behaviour had been called into question since his death. Four years to the day after he committed suicide, following the publication of both *The Pale King* (posthumously in 2011) and D. T. Max's biography *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (2012), an article appeared titled 'This Should Not Be A Love Story: Reading DT Max's Biography Of David Foster Wallace.' It begins:

> [W]hen I was a sophomore in college, my friend Karina loaned me a copy of David Foster Wallace's second collection of short stories, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. I picked it up in the morning and spent the day out on the quad, skipping my classes to tear through the whole book in a single sitting. The next day, Karina passed on *Infinite Jest* . . . over the course of that semester Karina and I began talking about taking a road trip out to Illinois, where David Foster Wallace taught. In imagining this trip, I constructed a picture of the three of us sitting outside on a lawn, rows of green corn behind us, as The Bandana Man himself explained his book to us . . . I envisioned him as a soft-spoken, sympathetic teacher, honored by our interest and eager to communicate . . . I must admit that, for me, part of the appeal of such a trip was the possibility that at the end of our impromptu book club meeting, the author might be willing to make out. Karina and I never made that pilgrimage, but if we had, David Foster Wallace would have had a term for us at the ready: "audience pussy." That's the brutal phrase that surfaces in DT Max's recent biography of Wallace, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, along with a series of similar anecdotes that suggest that if we'd actually found Wallace on the Illinois campus, he might not have explained *Infinite Jest* to us, but he may well have fucked us, in more ways than one.[79]

Kristen Roupenian writes about the reception of Max's biography, about critical reviews that with regularity described Wallace's life story as sympathetic. This is strange, Roupenian says. For her, 'the book unfolded like anything but a love story.'

> It starts early: 'When [Wallace's sister Amy] was three, he knocked out her front teeth. When he was in ninth grade, he got so mad at her… that he pushed her down and dragged her through the backyard through the excrement left by their dog.' But it explodes onto the page in Max's description of his relationship with Mary Karr. The two had the kind of relationship that, back in the day, we might have written off as 'tempestuous,' but reading the account today, it's hard to justify the behavior Max describes as anything other than abuse.[80]

[79] Kristen Roupenian, 'This Should Not Be a Love Story: Reading Dt Max's Biography of David Foster Wallace'*,* (Thought Catalog, 2012).
[80] Roupenian.

Roupenian's article was one among many across the years 2012-2018. Opinion pieces with headings like 'The Misogyny of David Foster Wallace,' and 'Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace' will give you a clue as to the trajectory of Wallace's celebrity. These pieces usually took one of two tracks: they were either wary of Wallace (if not outright opposed to him and his work) or they were wary of (again, if not outright opposed to) his fan base. The reaction to Wallace fans is interesting; Wallace's reputation is often conflated with his fans, and vice versa. This is maybe not all that unusual when it comes to perceptions of fandom more generally (what you like says something about you, inevitably), but it's worth paying attention to because it has consequences for how we engage with his work, especially now. Keep the term 'lit-bro' in mind and I'll say more on this later. For now, the thing to note is that by 2012 the other shoe was dropping on Wallace, and by 2018 it had well and truly dropped. Wallace had officially and posthumously become a problematic fave.

This problematic status seems, in part, to be an equal and opposite reaction to Wallace's sanctification following his death. In 2015 Christian Lorentzen wrote:

> Nobody owns David Foster Wallace anymore. In the seven years since his suicide, he's slipped out of the hands of those who knew him, and those who read him in his lifetime, and into the cultural maelstrom, which has flattened him. He has become a character, an icon, and in some circles a saint. . . he has been reduced to a wisdom-dispensing sage on the one hand and shorthand for the Writer As Tortured Soul on the other.[81]

This is not hyperbole. A 2011 article in *Esquire*, Benjamin Alsup's review of *The Pale King*, had the heading 'Saint David Foster Wallace: The Final, Beautiful Act of an Unwilling Icon.'[82] It's accompanied by a photoshopped image of Wallace's face on a saintly figure in a stained-glass window.

Wallace didn't die a saint. At least, not according to *Salon*'s Laura Miller. It was only afterwards that we indulged in hagiography. 'Wallace's death, and the private suffering that it revealed' led, Miller says, 'to the formation of an iconic posthumous public image that some of his friends have taken to calling "Saint Dave".'[83] In her article on 'the perils of litchat' (litchat here refers to informal conversations around literary works and their authors) Miller describes how Wallace's writing and early reputation wasn't initially received and thought of in terms of the wisdom and self-effacement and emotional generosity we tend to celebrate him for nowadays:

> The litchat take on Wallace was that he was very intelligent, but probably too intelligent for his own good; that he had written a book that was very long, but probably too long; that this book contained a lot of postmodern flourishes (most notably a ton of footnotes), and there was definitely too much of *that* for any sensible

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[81] Christian Lorentzen, 'The Rewriting of David Foster Wallace'*,* (Vulture, 2015).
[82] Benjamin Alsup, 'Saint David Foster Wallace'*,* (Esquire, 2011).
[83] Laura Miller, 'David Foster Wallace and the Perils of "Litchat"'*,* (The New Yorker, 2015).

reader to countenance. Above all, Wallace's writing was too difficult and probably not worth that difficulty. It was all very clever, litchat acknowledged, but it lacked real human emotion . . . Even sympathetic critics like Wyatt Mason and A. O. Scott treated Wallace's fiction as being primarily concerned with innovations in form rather than with the heartfelt moral messages now viewed as the forte of Saint Dave. It took Wallace's suicide to turn that battleship. Watching it happen was flabbergasting to anyone who'd been following his work all along.[84]

Miller's article is interesting to me for a few reasons, including her reminder that Saint Dave is a relatively recent idea. The way she describes the evolution of Wallace's reputation reveals a kind of possessiveness that Wallace fans (including the critics) feel they have of the author. I discovered him first. I liked him back when. I 'get' his work the most. I know the OG Wallace. On the Wallace listserv, an early online community for fans of Wallace that functions like an email chat room (it was set up in 1996 and continues to see traffic today, in 2020) there are members who refer to Wallace as 'Our Man.' Jonathan Franzen's piece in *The New Yorker*, 'Farther Away,' is equally territorial about Wallace, implying that who Wallace was to family and friends is more truthful than who Wallace was to his readers (this possessiveness a bit easier to understand given Franzen and Wallace were friends in real life, much to the irritation of Wallace fans who don't like Franzen or the way he complicates Wallace's memory for them).

The competing takes on Wallace and the recasts of his legacy are worth tracing, at least in broad strokes, because they help us understand, I think, why the reaction against Wallace in 2018 was so inflamed. If you came to Wallace after his death, as I did, 'Saint Dave' would be a big part of what you think of when you think of him. Saint Dave was the 'This is Water' guy, the one who explored questions of ethics with compassion, who offered self-help bromides to comfort the disturbed, who tried his level best to be a good human being. As of 2018, our memory of him is not only different but runs counter to this hagiography; Wallace is now a poster boy for misogyny. The severe dissonance between the two—saint and abusive asshole—is one component of the outrage directed at Wallace. People in glass houses shouldn't throw 'how to be a good person' advice into their works, as the saying goes.

These shifts in sentiment and approach to a public figure happen in public memory and also in scholarship, as new trends in critical analysis wax and wane. Lee Konstantinou notes, 'after a decorous period, critiques of Wallace's legacy have become increasingly common'.[85] And since his being embroiled in #MeToo, there have been some critics who resist, and in some cases refuse, reading Wallace. Konstantinou suggests that:

[t]his growing refusal might be viewed, on the one hand, as the inevitable backlash that arises against any cultural figure who draws any measure of attention (just

[84] Miller.
[85] Lee Konstantinou, 'Wallace's "Bad" Influence', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 49-64 (p. 49).

another turn of the culture industry) or, on the other hand, as the normal, healthy operation of literary history, in which readers, critics, and writers debate the significance of this or that artist, preserving a handful, discarding almost everyone else.[86]

Though both are plausible hypotheses, Konstantinou argues against this understanding of a refusal to engage with Wallace.[87] For different reasons, I also find the above explanation limited. I think it minimises a couple of key factors that have played into where we're at with Wallace right now. There's the #MeToo stuff, and the attendant boycott mentality behind call-out and cancel culture which supports #MeToo (more on which very soon), and there's also the internet to take into account. In his overview of the birth and growth of Wallace Studies, Adam Kelly makes a point of mentioning that 'David Foster Wallace was the first major writer to live and die in the internet age . . . [his] mature work coincided with the ascendance to global popularity of the worldwide web, and his growing reputation gained vital cultural traction owing to that brand new medium'.[88] Kelly argues that because of 'these technological shifts . . . the reception and formal study of Wallace's work is progressing in significantly different ways to that of earlier literary figures such as Joyce or Pynchon'.[89] I'd agree, with specific reference to how we approach Wallace's problematic past behaviour. To that end, here's an anecdote.

In September 2017, the first Australian conference on Wallace (OzWallace) was held in Melbourne. I attended, and during a Q&A session someone brought up—I can't remember why—that Heidegger used to be a Nazi.[90] Things got very careful very quickly. The consensus was that this was an instance where the concept of separating art from the artist was pretty clear cut. This could be for a lot of reasons, none of which I'm gonna spend time on here except to say that Wallace, by contrast, is a trickier case to nut out—the reception of his work does differ to that of earlier problematic figures. And the internet's contribution to this is something I'd like to think more about.

The internet, firstly, made/makes Wallace criticism a 'more democratic' and less gate-kept enterprise.[91] In his article, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline,' Kelly writes that '[t]he ease of publication which the internet allows has meant that the detailed close reading of Wallace's texts, traditionally the preserve of academic engagement, has in great part been carried out by skillful and committed non-professional readers, who publish their findings in the public domain of the web'.[92] This same ease translates to the non-scholarly publishing

[86] Konstantinou, 'Wallace's "Bad" Influence', p. 50.
[87] For Konstantinou's take on things, see 'Wallace's "Bad" Influence', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace,* pp. 49-64.
[88] Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline', *IJAS online,* (2010), 48.
[89] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline', p. 48.
[90] For someone else's reckoning with their problematic fave, have a read of: Joshua Rothman, 'Is Heidegger Contaminated by Nazism'*,* (The New Yorker, 2014).
[91] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline'.
[92] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline'.

of anti-Wallace articles online. The internet has created a space for conversations that previously would have been cloistered in academia.

Wallace having been the first major writer to live and die in the internet age means that he has, in complicated ways that I'm still trying to think my way through, been kept alive online despite his death. And so even though his passing should perhaps make him less urgent a topic of conversation in our current #MeToo era (he is not alive to harm anyone anymore, nor is he alive to profit directly from his work, should we continue to engage with it), he is still a prominent topic of some very heated debates. Wallace was just contemporary enough that he hasn't been exempt from what the internet brings to bear on conversations around problematic faves.

A final comment on the earlier mentioned litchat, as it pertains to things here. In her article, Miller says that a good part of a writer's reputation emerges informally, through the conversations between writers, readers, and critics. Litchat (a term I'd apply to the anti-Wallace articles online), bears heavily on how we receive the writer and their work. Miller writes that

> litchat has assumed an ever-greater role in criticism because so much of what once happened privately and fleetingly is now public and preserved. Social-media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are the main sites where this litchat happens today, and conversations on both spill over into digital and print journalism, which takes remarks made in interviews that generate Twitter responses and then amplifies them, spawning even more Twitter responses. All this, the positive and the negative, in turn, becomes part of a writer's media persona, and something it feels obligatory to address when reviewing her work. When authors tweet—and most publishers urge them to do so—the line between work and persona can become almost impossible to draw.[93]

Litchat becomes a shortcut for deciding how you feel about an author and their work. Miller talks about this in relation to Franzen and how his persona is a concoction of social media litchat.

> Although his fiction is the occasion of his fame, it is now no longer necessary to have read any of it to have an opinion about Franzen and whether he deserves that fame. Certainly, it's far less time-consuming simply to read tweets about other tweets about headlines of profiles or pull quotes from reviews that the original tweeter may or may not have read, and which may or may not accurately represent what the writer or the novel actually said. Furthermore, nothing strikes such readers as smarter than a well-written confirmation of what they already believe. The novel itself hardly matters. Litchat has become an end in itself.[94]

Miller says that Wallace 'was the Franzen of his day,' (even though they were contemporaries) but she suggests that Wallace's litchat has little written record, having arisen pre- a lot of social media. The litchat that did exist was the stuff that touted Wallace as a genius, or that criticised his work for being bereft of heart. But, as I mention above, I would also now include as litchat all that's been published on Wallace online since his death. Miller wrote her piece in 2015, and I think what's

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[93] Miller.
[94] Miller.

happened to his reputation and legacy since then destroys the idea that Wallace was at all exempt from gaining a social media persona—it's just that the social media stuff that has fed into how we think about Wallace now is totally out of his hands; his online persona is not his to manage (and given how he was apparently super controlling of his public persona, this seems at once both karmic and unfair). As with Franzen, it's not necessary to have read anything Wallace has written in order to have an opinion on him and his work.[95] I think this gestures towards a bigger problem with social media as a shortcut for complex issues, but that's a conversation for elsewhere. For now, our focus is on Saint Dave, and his fall from grace.

So Wallace is a saint, his fans disciples. And then, in May of 2018 Mary Karr tweets about Wallace's abusive behaviour towards her. This appeared to be news to many, but Wallace's history had not been a secret, and it was not ignored in the D. T. Max biography, as Karr claims. The importance or seriousness given to it in the biography and by those who read it, how much it was glossed over or minimised is another matter. Here is some of what appeared in the biography:

> Wallace did not hear subtle variations in no; he knew only one way to seduce: overwhelm. He would show up at Karr's family home near McLean to shovel her driveway after a snowfall, or come unannounced to her recovery meetings. Karr called Deb Larson and asked her to let Wallace know his attentions were not welcome. Wallace besieged her with notes anyway . . . One day, she remembers, he arrived at a pool party she was at with her family with bandages on his left shoulder. She thought maybe he had been cutting himself and wouldn't show her what was underneath—a tattoo with her name and a heart . . . Wallace told friends they were involved, Karr says no.[96]

> The relationship with Karr was not moving forward, becoming another source of anger. Karr and her husband were still living together. She says she had cut off all contact. Still, Wallace thought if he could have Karr, his life would come together . . . She worried about his tendency to what he called 'black-eyed red-outs.'[97]

> Wallace's literary rebirth did not coincide with any calming of his conviction that he had to be with Karr. Indeed, the opposite. In fact, one day in February, he thought briefly of committing murder for her. He called an ex-con he knew through his recovery program and tried to buy a gun. He had decided he would wait no longer for Karr to leave her husband; he planned to shoot him instead when he came into Cambridge to pick up the family dog. The ex-con called Larson, the head of Granada House, who told Karr. Wallace himself never showed up for the handover and thus ended what he would later call in a letter of apology 'one of the scariest days of my life.' He wrote Larson in explanation, 'I now know what obsession can make people capable of'—then added in longhand after—'at least of *wanting* to do.' To Karr at the time he insisted that the whole episode was an invention of the ex-con and she believed him.[98]

[95] See, for example: Amy Hungerford, 'On Refusing to Read', *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* (2016) or Deirdre Coyle, 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me', *Electric Literature,* (2017)
[96] Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, p. 147.
[97] Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, p. 151.
[98] Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, pp. 162-63.

> One night Wallace tried to push Karr from a moving car. Soon afterward, he got so mad at her that he threw her coffee table at her. He sent her $100 for the remnants. She had a friend who was a lawyer write back to say she still owned the table, "all he'd bought was the 'brokenness.'"[99]

Karr said she hadn't spoken up about this previously because 'nobody believed me. or they believed and didnt give a shit.... alas. i am not the only one'.[100] In an interview with Robin Young, Karr said:

> One reason I finally spoke up about the violence is I have so many young women who write things that I read, they imagine that I could never be in a situation with somebody who is violent. And I've got to just say after 20 years of silence about it, at a certain point, I feel like I was complicit with somebody who beat my ass and was a torment. I felt awful when he died. I thought it was terrible. But I'd been a writer for . . . before he was born. Some people consider me a footnote in the biography of this guy who's seen as this sort of sainted sage who tragically could not live in this wicked world, and he just happens to be a guy who was brutal to me . . . The worst thing he did was climb up the side of my house onto my bedroom balcony, and also follow my son home, and my son was 5. And also try to buy a gun to kill my husband. And the biographer had saw letters where these things were discussed. It's not like this stuff was not known. I think what D.T. Max said about it was that it made — his violence made him more 'fascinating.'[101]

In a 2012 interview for *The Atlantic*, D. T. Max and Eric Been discuss Wallace's 'tumultuous relationship' with Karr. Max tells Been what it was like to be privy to a letter of apology from Wallace to Karr, apologising for contemplating buying a gun to kill her husband. Max comments that 'the craftsmanship of that letter is quite remarkable. You read it like a David Foster Wallace essay'.[102] He continues:

> I didn't know that David had that in him. I was surprised, in general, with the intensity of violence in his personality. It was something I knew about him when I wrote *The New Yorker* piece, but it grew on me. It made me think harder about David and creativity and anger. But on the other end of the spectrum, he was also this open, emotional guy, who was able to cry, who intensely loved his dogs. He was all those things. That, in part, is why he's a really fascinating guy and an honor to write about.[103]

When the shit hit the fan with Wallace, I kept coming back to one sulking thought: *but I really, really want to keep liking him*. A few years ago I would have read this interview and felt reassured by it. There is a lot we want to accommodate when it comes to 'genius.' And genius is something that's all

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[99] Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, p. 175.
[100] Mary Karr (@marykarlLit). "havent written abt it because nobody believed me. or they believed and didnt give a shit.... alas. i am not the only one." 6 May 2018, 12:00AM. Tweet. https://twitter.com/marykarrlit/status/992773539299241984
[101] Mary Karr qtd. in Robin Young, 'Memoirist Mary Karr on God, #Metoo and Speaking up About David Foster Wallace'*, (wbur, 2018).
[102] Eric Been, 'David Foster Wallace: Genius, Fabulist, Would-Be Murderer'*, (The Atlantic, 2012).
[103] D. T. Max qtd. in Been.

too readily attributed to Wallace. In his foreword to the tenth anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest*, Dave Eggers writes:

> Here's a question once posed to me, by a large, baseball cap-wearing English major at a medium-size western college: Is it our duty to read *Infinite Jest*? This is a good question, and one that many people, particularly literary-minded people, ask themselves. The answer is: Maybe. Sort of. Probably, in some way. If we think it's our duty to read this book, it's because we're interested in genius.[104]

The above quote is not the only instance where Wallace is touted as a genius. A quick Google search will yield you articles that parade the word genius in their titles: 'The Genius of David Foster Wallace,' 'The Turbulent Genius of David Foster Wallace,' 'Why we must keep trying to deconstruct the troubled genius of David Foster Wallace.' And then, on May 9, 2018, another: 'David Foster Wallace and the Dangerous Romance of Male Genius.' Also writing for *The Atlantic*, Megan Garber emphasises how when it comes to powerful men, men 'too good to lose,' women who have been abused by these men are asked to 'be accommodating and compliant and convenient'—to not stir up trouble.[105] Karr is no exception. She describes her relationship with Wallace as 'a bad, sad part of my past that I've only recently sort of come forward with. And I was kind of scolded by a handful of people about it because it was seen as though I were being unkind or something, which is what happens to a lot of women'.[106] Garber sees in Karr's story a complicated dynamic, one that is reproduced in all corners of 'a culture that prefers uncomplicated idols,' and one that is powered by 'our insistent fealty to—our implicit faith in—the notion of genius itself'.[107]

> 'Talent is its own expectation,' Wallace wrote in *Infinite Jest*, and he was, of course, correct: There's a canny tautology to all of this. Genius, a means to godliness and its best evidence, cannot be argued with. Genius cannot be reasoned with. Genius is the answer and the question. It will be heard. It will be respected. Even when it kicks and stalks and climbs up the side of the house at night . . . Genius itself, the way we typically conceive of it, remains infused with the male gaze . . . It is a designation reserved, almost exclusively, for men.[108]

Case in point. In his foreword, Eggers (the guy who wrote *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*) lists a few other examples of artists or works that he considers to also involve some sort of genius: Stephin Merritt, Howard Finster, Sufjan Stevens, Jack Kerouac, William T. Vollmann, Michael Apted, and *Shoah* (dir. by Claude Lanzmann). 'These dynamics are unavoidably at play,' Garber says, when Karr 'reminds the world of Wallace's behavior toward her . . . The horror stories had simply been subsumed into the broader story (the 'greater good') of Wallace's personal genius: as

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[104] Dave Eggers Foreword to David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, (London: Abacus, 2011), p. x.
[105] Megan Garber, 'David Foster Wallace and the Dangerous Romance of Male Genius', (The Atlantic, 2018).
[106] Mary Karr qtd. in Young.
[107] Garber.
[108] Garber.

evidence of his uncontainable passion, of the singular depth of his wanting'.[109] And you can see this play out in how, historically, Karr's relationship with Wallace has been written and talked about. One example: 'Picture having a crush so hard you get her name tattooed on your shoulder and drive unannounced to mow her lawn, unasked, only to be spurned'.[110] Another example, a question posed in an interview with D. T. Max: 'In his relationship with the author Mary Karr, Wallace exhibited a good deal of anger . . . What was it about his feelings for her that created such trouble for Wallace?'[111]

It's easy for me to cherry-pick some nicely enraging quotes that illustrate this point about male genius and women's testimonies. None of us know what went on in the relationship between Karr and Wallace except Karr and Wallace, and a person, whoever they are, can't be reduced to or understood only by their behaviour in a single relationship (nor, it should be said, only by the 'genius' of their writing). But in all this messiness, the question remains: what moral compromises are we willing to make for a man that many of us consider to be 'too good to lose'?

Rebecca Rothfeld, in her article 'The Misogyny of David Foster Wallace,' grapples with this question. She describes how when she read *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* she fell in love with Wallace. When she learned that Wallace referred to 'female fans who attended his book tours "audience pussy,"' and that he had described 'one of the many women he bedded as "a three-day weekend I'm still paying the credit card bill on,"' and that he had confessed to wondering whether his sole purpose in life was to "put his penis into as many vaginas as possible"', Rothfeld was 'predictably alarmed'.[112] What she was 'unpredictably alarmed by' was 'something even more difficult to reconcile: Namely, my ready forgiveness of the author, my totally unfounded yet near boundless belief in the Wallace who had written so beautifully and my attendant disbelief in the Wallace who had spoken so crassly'. Rothfeld says that '[a]fter several hours of soul-searching, I found that my faith in Wallace's fundamental goodness, intelligence, and likeability remained basically intact'.[113]

Like many of his readers, my faith in Wallace had, until 2018, been confident. Embarrassingly, this is largely because I also feel possessive of him. As if I know him better than what's being said about him. As if he's my friend. I want to be able to overlook Wallace's biography, in favour of his work. Or, more honestly, I want to overlook the nasty parts. Keeping the artist separate from the art isn't a genuine option for me, because I also rely on that same biography for the version of Wallace that I love and that I read into his work. I don't want to lose this version. I have so

[109] Garber.

[110] Binit Priyaranjan, 'Why We Must Keep Trying to Deconstruct the Troubled Genius of David Foster Wallace', (Scroll.in, 2016).

[111] John Williams, 'God, Mary Karr and Ronald Reagan: D.T. Max on David Foster Wallace', (The New York Times, 2012).

[112] Rebecca Rothfeld, 'The Misogyny of David Foster Wallace', (Daily News, 2013).

[113] Rothfeld.

far given seven years of my life to Wallace. How should I square up this time if after 2018 I have to conclude that my investment is problematic? The time and effort I've sunk into Wallace, personally and professionally, risks being undermined if I can't make this moral compromise. But I know I wouldn't make that compromise so easily for anyone else's abusive behaviour, and it seems dangerous to settle into picking and choosing who we can stay mad at, and who we let off the hook.

Maybe even more sinister is that sometimes it feels like this question of what compromises we're willing to make isn't even asked, nor is an answer expected. In her 2012 article on the Max's biography, Roupenian writes that she doesn't expect Wallace's readers to recognise a moral compromise might be being made.

> I don't expect people to be angry at Wallace, or even to spend time condemning him. Obviously, he had a lot of shit on his plate, and he struggled mightily with the burdens he had. All I expect is a quiet, un-showy disqualification for the role of hero, mentor or saint . . . I would like our generational role model not to be another selfish genius of a guy who, in exchange for doing his job unusually well, got away pretty much his whole life with treating other people as though they were disposable. There are a lot of these people in the world, but as Wallace himself said, 'We get to choose what to worship.' We don't have to worship this.
> But because as a culture we value what we value and worship what we worship, I have little doubt that the David Foster Wallace juggernaut will continue to roll on. Brainy undergraduates will continue to idolize him; ambitious writers will continue to imitate him, and young female fans reading Max's biography might feel a flash of discomfort . . . but they will tell themselves it doesn't matter and in a way they will be right.[114]

But as of 2018 this maybe doesn't have to be true. As of 2018, the question of what to worship isn't redundant—it's just posed a little differently. As of 2018 we can do more than not worship someone, we can cancel them.

Checking if Wallace is cancelled at amicancelled.com

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[114] Roupenian.

Movements like #MeToo are an indicator of where our culture is at. We could call this present culture by a few names, or descriptors: cancel culture, call-out culture, a culture of outrage, there are others. To keep things simple, I'll stick with cancel culture and call-out culture. The distinction that I see to make between the two is that call-out culture is the prelude to cancel culture. You are called-out (for your views or your behaviour) and sometimes, although nowadays it seems increasingly often, you are 'cancelled' over it. Call-outs and cancellations 'are usually performed in an online forum, where context and specificity are so easily obscured.'[115] 'To 'call someone out' is to draw a name into the public conversation by force – usually at the wish of someone on the receiving end of unpleasant behaviour, or on behalf of them.'[116] Cancelling 'refers to total disinvestment in something (anything),'[117] it is, in theory, 'an expression of agency,'[118] a kind of 'cultural boycott,' underwritten by the 'agreement not to amplify, signal boost, give money to. People talk about the attention economy — when you deprive someone of your attention, you're depriving them of a livelihood.'[119] Cancel culture 'proposes that we can leave behind institutions, corporations, and individuals who have acted in their own interest above others'.[120] And with our newly recognised power as consumers, well, we've gone a bit mad with it.

> Almost everyone worth knowing has been canceled by someone. Bill Gates is canceled. Gwen Stefani and Erykah Badu are canceled. Despite his relatively strong play in the World Cup, Cristiano Ronaldo has been canceled. Taylor Swift is canceled and Common is canceled and . . . Antoni Porowski, a "Queer Eye" fan favorite was also canceled. Needless to say, Kanye West is canceled, too. Also canceled: concepts! 2018 is 'officially, extremely canceled,' and so is love. And, inevitably, saying something "is canceled" is also canceled.[121]

And, to echo Jenny Sinclair in her article on #MeToo: 'I'm confronting a very 21st century problem: what should I let myself enjoy?'[122]

This question smacks of privilege, of course. My primary concern when there were calls to boycott Wallace was that it would be inconvenient for me if I had to stop reading him. A more charitable perspective on it all would be that it is undeniably tricky and fraught to come to grips with these new anxiety-inducing and shame-inflicting concepts of calling out and being cancelled (new, at least, in their potency and in the deregulated and volatile environment of the internet). Taking this view, the

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[115] Jonno Revanche, 'Cancelled on the Overground Railroad', (Griffith Review, 2019).
[116] Revanche.
[117] Jonah Engel Bromwich, 'Everyone Is Canceled', (The New York Times, 2018).
[118] Meredith Clark qtd. in Bromwich.
[119] Lisa Nakamura qtd. in Bromwich.
[120] Jared Richards, 'How Do We Move Forward When Every Artist We Love Is 'Problematic'?', (Junkee., 2019).
[121] Bromwich.
[122] Jenny Sinclair, 'After #Metoo, I'm Left Confused by 'Call-out' Culture', (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2019).

question of what we're allowed to enjoy can be a genuine and searching one. Those who are troubled by this question are troubled because we are being told that there is an ethical and moral and correct answer, and we want to know what that is and then act on it. Not to mention we want to be seen to be acting on it, lest we be called out ourselves.

Attendees of the Fifth Annual David Foster Wallace Conference (DFW18) couldn't avoid this question of what we can let ourselves enjoy. The keynote address, given by Clare Hayes-Brady, was titled 'Reading your problematic fave: David Foster Wallace, feminism and #metoo.' She was direct about the allegations against Wallace: 'I believe Mary Karr. I have no difficulty believing that Wallace behaved in the ways she has described, and I have no difficulty describing that behaviour as abusive'.[123] From there, she talked about the work currently being done in Wallace Studies (in recent years there's been so much stuff being written on Wallace that it's become its own established sub-field), noting where things are progressing and where more work needs to happen.[124] When it came to the question of if we can still read Wallace, she tried to measure the value of reading against the value of a refusal to engage. Clare believes that there is still value in reading and teaching Wallace, in a new context. What felt especially attuned in Clare's speech was how she wanted to 'take this a bit further and consider the specific cultural moment we're in at the moment and how resisting the temptation to withdraw from these texts can, I argue, enrich our understanding of that moment'.[125]

Like other commentators, Clare also noted that Wallace's behaviour had been neutralised by the whole mythology of male genius thing and said that this is part and parcel of 'a cultural context that promotes and validates less overt forms of coercion and abuse'. [126] Clare talked about toxic masculinity and then gave an account of instances where we can see this in Wallace's writing and how this is informed by our culture, one that valorises toxic masculinity. Clare wasn't interested in justifying Wallace's behaviour, nor was she invested in getting people to read Wallace. 'It's an understandable instinct,' she said, 'to boycott, to turn away, to somehow seek to punish the artist through the art, and functions as a personal action of principle. It goes without saying, I hope, that choosing not to read a certain writer because of things they have said or done is absolutely a valid choice'.[127] Clare's concern instead lay with the role of the critic, and she had 'serious reservations about [this choice to boycott] being mooted as a form of critical praxis.' Refusing to engage with Wallace would only serve to 'reinforce a neoliberal, late capitalist mode of understanding or

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[123] Clare Hayes-Brady, 'Reading Your Problematic Fave: David Foster Wallace, Feminism and #Metoo'*, (2018), (p. 3).
[124] Adam Kelly provides a good overview of the state of things, too, as of 2010. See: Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline'.
[125] Hayes-Brady, p. 3.
[126] Hayes-Brady, p. 3.
[127] Hayes-Brady, p. 6.

encountering art.'[128] If you don't like someone, you can register that dislike on a market level—don't buy their book, they don't get the money. But this kind of resistance turns 'disengagement into an individual consumer action, rather than a critical action.'[129]

> Now, boycott can certainly work on a large scale, and movements like #metoo give a collective heft to individual stories that bolster efforts like this, but it remains, I think, a fundamentally anti-critical stance. The non-reading response seems to me also to in some way absolve the larger patriarchal structures that have in large measure given rise to the cultural contexts of both the art and the behaviour . . . disengagement actually works to simply silence the problem by simply removing dissenting voices from the conversation on an individual or small-scale basis.[130]

Our job as critics, Clare suggests, is to engage. For me, as I imagine for the other conference-goers, this is a reassuring and motivating thought. But there's another take on this (isn't there always). Daniel Kolitz, a writer for *The Outline*, attended the Wallace conference to report on how Wallace readers were approaching him in 2018. Kolitz wrote that Clare's talk

> gave us exactly what we wanted; perhaps what many of us came to Normal to find: a cogent and nuanced permission structure within which to a) continue reading Wallace (none of us were ever going to stop doing this, anyway) and b) justify our continued reading to others — others who, like anyone with a political conviction in 2018, are fundamentally unpersuadable, and who either way wouldn't take well to being accused of neoliberalist sympathies.[131]

Whether or not this is fair to Clare's speech, Kolitz's attitude concerns me. What we permit is important, and given the cynical context he puts this in, I don't want Kolitz's version of permission. It feels like a cop-out. And while I'm sure there are plenty of permission-seekers out there who just want the green light to keep on doing as they're doing, I think the suggestion that this is all Wallace fans want from these conversations misrepresents the readers that seek, but are prepared not to give themselves, this permission. It misrepresents the readers who want to do the right thing and who want to be ethical consumers. Until now, reading Wallace wasn't at odds with this. Now, they, *we*, are confused about how to move forward.

Can I still read Wallace? Kolitz notes, perceptively, that this 'question is thornier with Wallace than it would be for most of his contemporaries. Plenty of people love the novels of Jeffrey Eugenides — but how many of them love *Jeffrey Eugenides*?'[132] And here, I need to press pause on the call-out/cancel culture discussion for a second, because there's an element to all this that I've left implicit but that

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[128] Hayes-Brady, p. 6.
[129] Hayes-Brady, p. 6.
[130] Hayes-Brady, p. 6.
[131] Daniel Kolitz, 'Academics Explain David Foster Wallace to Me'*,* (The Outline, 2018).
[132] Kolitz.

heavily bears on why it's been so complicated to work out how to deal with Wallace being cancelled. To do that, though, I have to say some things that are sort of at odds, on face value, with my 'job' as an objective literary critic and scholar. The first of these things is: I love Wallace. Not just his work. *Wallace*. I am a big fan. He's more than a scholarly interest for me. I am personally attached to his work and, since studying him, I have become personally attached to the community that has formed around his work. Reading him helped me recover from my eating disorder, hence my attachment to the writing. The relationship I have to his work is part of why I want to be involved in our community's efforts to support peoples' interest in him. Reading him led me to the Wallace community, which (in spite of the reputation of Wallace fans that gets trotted out in online articles) is full of wonderful people. I have been writing my PhD on Wallace and this community for years now. My personal and professional identity is pretty much built from being a fan of Wallace. It would cost me a lot to give up on him.

I'm not the only fan to feel this way. At the 2017 Wallace conference Matt Luter spoke about how 'Wallace is a writer with whom many readers, in and out of the academy, feel deep, emotional connection.'[133] I can make overly general guesses as to why this is the case—as I said above, Wallace feels like our friend, he makes us feel unalone, he writes about mental health with insight and compassion and that can foster an intense attachment to, if not dependency on, the work and the man, etc.—but the point is, Wallace fans love him in an intensely personal way. And although there is real value in reading Wallace critically (as Clare says, 'reading Wallace offers us as critics an exceptional repository of work created in that strange crucible where toxic masculinity and virtue-signalling feminist language meet – the "woke misogynist".')[134] most readers do not choose to read Wallace because they want to interrogate his work this way. So while I think the critical approach that Clare advocates is one good answer to the 'Can I still read Wallace?' question, I also think it's only part of what should be a bigger picture, one that extends beyond Wallace Studies and beyond academia. An easy answer for me would be that yes I can still read Wallace, yes it is acceptable to write a thesis on his work because people are complicated and the art and artist are separate things and we can generate productive conversations around his work in this context etcetera, and I can do all of that while understanding Wallace has done some bad things. But this reasoning doesn't, for me, resolve the discomfort or even at times shame that I'd feel in reading Wallace today, while I inhabit a culture that is frothing at the mouth to call-out and cancel others.

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[133] Matthew Luter, 'Me and Wallace's Shadow: Creating Space for the Personal in Writing About Wallace'*,* (2018), (p. 1).
[134] Hayes-Brady, p. 6.

In his 2019 essay for *Griffith Review*, Jonno Revanche writes that:

> When we call someone out, we do it with the full knowledge that all previous attempts to remedy harm have been shot down, avoided or negated, and the trial of public opinion is the final card to play. If anything, a call-out is an indictment on any given community regarding its inability to act on the issue in private. At the least, it can shift the burden of responsibility away from the individual and onto the community, where it should always have been. This is how accountability would operate in an ideal world: as something we are investing in collectively to ensure the health and continued growth of our peers, our kin, our families.[135]

But I'm not sure this is really how call-out and cancel culture works. There are a few things that worry me about the way we do, or at least perform, this kind of social justice. These concerns don't (only) sprout from my defensiveness of Wallace. What's happening with him and his work points to a larger climate of outrage that is, I think, flawed and potentially counterproductive to the project of change. One thing we have to contend with, for better or worse, is what the internet brings to bear on these conversations—after all, the internet, and in particular social media, might well be the reason we can have them in the first place.

The internet might give us the space to call someone out in an effort to remedy a harm, but it also 'expands the potential for ordinary forms of smearing, invasion of privacy, and other abuse,' it 'exacerbates problems of group polarization and encourages extreme viewpoints,' and 'it enhances the ability to punish people for nonconforming conduct, especially for disliked or offensive, but democratically legitimate, speech'.[136] Jemayel Khawaja, reporting on our culture of outrage, says:

> To fit the fast-shrinking attention span of the internet audience, there is less room than ever for nuance or subtlety in the current state of the digital content cycle. Stories come readymade in bite-sized, polarizing morsels primed to be chewed up and spit out by the end of your scroll. With that develops a troubling pattern: Offense! Outrage! Response! Vindication! Next![137]

Online, negativity is rewarded. This negativity is usually paraded with an attitude of moral clarity, or, less charitably, superiority. And I get it. Our communities and our institutions have failed (or failed enough) at dealing with urgent and charged issues; we'll take whatever power we can get to deal with it ourselves. We don't bother waiting endlessly for someone in an official position of power to judge something as wrong. We've moved those trials online. 'The ubiquity of social media has profoundly altered the character of public debate. Large-scale cultural warfare can now be fought in cyber-space'.[138] Beyond the equally promising and disturbing potential of this, the worry that seems to be popping up more and more, a worry I share, is that '[s]omewhere along the line, the call out has

[135] Revanche.
[136] Russell Blackford, *The Tyranny of Opinion: Conformity and the Future of Liberalism*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 167.
[137] Jemayel Khawaja, 'In the Internet Age, We All Live in a Culture of Outrage'*, (Vice*, 2015).
[138] Blackford, p. 171.

stopped being a tool with which to fight abuse and become a social media morality performance.[139] In a 2019 interview, Barack Obama said:

> This idea of purity and you're never compromised and you're always politically woke and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly. The world is messy. There are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids and share certain things with you . . . If I tweet or hashtag about how you didn't do something right or used the wrong verb, I can sit back and feel pretty good about myself. 'Man you see how woke I was, I called you out.' But that's not activism. That's not bringing about change.[140]

Inevitably, Obama copped online flack for this too. Some of it was likely warranted. Because complicated issues like this are messy.

I want to suggest, and I'm not the first to do so, that a genuine and positive impulse towards change has warped into an insistence on purity. Call-out and cancel culture has enabled us to each be our own little morality police officer, and while we exert pressure on others to conform to our way of thinking (and sometimes we can do this in very effective and damaging ways) we are more focused on the performance of morality than we are with reflecting on how we use this to make headway in the bigger picture. Worse than being ineffectual is being harmful, and call-out and cancel culture has corollary effects and implications that go beyond individual instances of injustice. Mostly, and ironically, it seems that this culture shuts down conversations it's meaning to open up.

Maybe you feel empowered by call-out and cancel culture. I don't. Mostly, I feel inhibited. Echoing Russell Blackford, in his 2019 book on *The Tyranny of Opinion*, I am afraid.

> Like many people, I'm afraid to speak up and say exactly what I think. I'm afraid to contribute to public debate with total frankness. I'm more afraid of allies than I am of opponents . . . I'm not afraid of my closest friends, the people who love me, who have my back and will keep my secrets, but it gets more frightening as soon as I step out into wider circles of colleagues and acquaintances.[141]

I don't even think I have particularly controversial things to say (that I'm aware of, and without a doubt I'm not aware of everything). At least, not controversial around the people I would expect to be my allies. I tend to want a lot of the things we, in our loose understanding of the political spectrum, might associate with left-wing thinking—things that call-out and cancel culture and #MeToo are meant to be aligned with. But sometimes I get confused and I don't understand something. And the

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[139] Vicky Spratt, '#Cancelled: Has Call out Culture Gone Too Far?', (*Grazia*, 2018).
[140] Malaika Jabali, 'Barack Obama Thinks 'Woke' Kids Want Purity. They Don't: They Want Progress', (*The Guardian*, 2019).
[141] Blackford, p. 1.

waiting jaws of call-out culture mean that I don't dare question what a loud online majority has decided is the obviously right or good thing. At least, not in public, where I may get bitten.

Blackford writes that '[o]nline forms of policing and shaming have created an environment with new pressures to conform'.[142] This happens on both sides. When Mary Karr tweeted about Wallace, I felt pressure to disassociate from him and his work. As a member of the Wallace community, I felt pressure defend him. (To be fair, this is pressure that, though implicit in my environment, was largely something I put on myself, as a Wallace fan.) I ended up doing neither, really. Not just because I was worried I'd do the wrong thing and be punished for it, but mostly because I just didn't know what to do. I still don't know what to do. But everything in my online and physical environment shows me, not just related to the situation with Wallace, that it isn't safe to be uncertain, and it isn't safe to get something wrong.

Where I've felt this most distinctly is in the university setting. Part of that is because I've spent the last nine years of my life there, so it's almost all I know, and part of it is that I think there have been real noticeable changes over that time, about what a university is for. Each university and college, any higher education institution, has its own mission. But whether your main driver is social justice or the pursuit of truth (whatever we can claim that as being), the one thing that I think should be consistent across all campuses is the opportunity to feel safe and to learn. Call-out culture may not be creating lasting positive change more broadly, but what happens online has had a real effect on academia. Conor Friedersdorf, in a 2017 article for *The Atlantic* asked students if they were better off before social media. It ended up that the students had more complaints and concerns about social media than they did positive things to say. They were especially preoccupied by 'the stresses of call-out culture. They had no problem with objections to violence, or slurs, or other serious transgressions; but fretted that call-out culture now goes far beyond matters like that'.[143] One student wrote:

> I actively try to keep up on opinion articles posted on Facebook and other social media sites, as well as statuses by friends, so that I can be caught up with the trends and not appear to be ignorant or outdated among my peers. One time, around Halloween, I read a piece that a friend posted about a Mexican Tequila-themed party that had happened at a small liberal arts school. A few members of the student government had attended and taken a picture wearing a sombrero. The entire school was so outraged that their student leadership had participated in cultural appropriation that they ridiculed them online and forced them to step down.
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> Now, reading this article was stressful for me because my roommates and I had planned a tequila-themed birthday party for a friend that same night . . . I was concerned that someone would call us out for cultural appropriation, even though we didn't call it a 'Mexican' party or have sombreros there. We just wanted to drink margaritas and offered some chips and guac as snacks.
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> This made the party considerably more stressful for me. I was constantly welcoming people and telling them we hoped we weren't appropriating, and watching

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[142] Blackford, p. 174.
[143] Conor Friedersdorf, 'The Destructiveness of Call-out Culture on Campus', (The Atlantic, 2017).

out for people who may have reacted badly to the theme . . . Since then, we haven't had any tequila-themed parties.[144]

Friedersdorf makes the comment that it's possible to worry about violating social norms in any era, but that today 'so many people are declaring so many things problematic on college campuses that the next controversy is almost impossible to predict'.[145] Another student wrote:

> I probably hold back 90 percent of the things that I want to say due to fear of being called out . . . People won't call you out because your opinion is wrong. People will call you out for literally anything. On Twitter today I came across someone making fun of a girl who made a video talking about how much she loved God and how she was praying for everyone. There were hundreds of comments, rude comments, below the video. It was to the point that they weren't even making fun of what she was standing for. They were picking apart everything. Her eyebrows, the way her mouth moves, her voice, the way her hair was parted. Ridiculous. I am not the kind of person to be able to brush off insults like that. Hence why I avoid any situation that could put me in that position. And that's sad.[146]

This is not the change that call-out and cancel culture seeks. For those of us who aren't already and automatically alienated for holding opposing views, we learn how to police ourselves, and we learn how to conform to whatever tribe we want to belong to. But that doesn't mean we understand why something is moral or ethical. The really valuable learning doesn't take place. What we learn is to keep quiet. The results of this, Blackford writes, 'can be unfortunate: harm to individuals who could have made social contributions; suppression of ideas worth consideration; impoverished public debate; misrepresentation of our real knowledge, opinions, and preferences; accumulating compromises with honesty and truth, until we live far from the land of reality; and, in many situations, a culture of wariness, or outright fear'.[147] We learn to 'walk on eggshells in all our dealings except with intimate friends'.[148] Blackford says that in this climate '[w]e reach for off-the-shelf ideologies – systematic schemes of ideas about politics, economics, or society – and we insist on them inflexibly, even though they're inevitably contentious'.[149] 'In an atmosphere of permanent crisis,' he continues, 'we refuse to countenance disagreement, and we respond with outrage not only to opponents but also to moderates on our own side of an argument, or to anyone who thinks independently'.[150] There is less time and tolerance for nuance in our conversations. There is less time and tolerance to maybe get something wrong, talk about it, and maybe check yourself and change your mind.

In the university setting this kind of stark approach to what kind of views are allowed and disallowed seems anathema to the very purpose of higher education (which, forgetting ideas of truth

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[144] Friedersdorf.
[145] Friedersdorf.
[146] Friedersdorf.
[147] Blackford, p. 195.
[148] Blackford, p. 195.
[149] Blackford, p. 195.
[150] Blackford, p. 195.

vs. social justice for a moment, is, at its most literal, to learn stuff). And the confluence of cancel culture and the ongoing marketisation of universities, as well as casualisation of labour, means that academics, especially those that are casual, early-career, non-tenured—in two words, vulnerable and replaceable—the trade-off between academic freedom of expression and a person's career and livelihood is, well, uneven at best. With students becoming synonymous with consumers, their disengagement or refusal to bear with an uncomfortable or opposing view gives them an unusual amount of power to determine what's okay and what isn't within the corporate university setting.[151] In its most extreme form, this kind of polarisation of views leads us back to debates about free vs. hate speech. And while that's a whole thing in and of itself that would warrant a separate essay, you can see the binary thinking that informs these issues at a university level. I have qualified sympathy for arguments on either side of this debate, but the point we seem to be missing is that all of this stuff exists on a continuum. Blanket prescriptions that are pro- or anti-cancel culture do not accommodate the space between.

The world is messy. But call-out culture is driven by the implicit belief that people are good or bad. And the internet 'makes the situation worse: spreading propaganda, intensifying ideological commitments, encouraging group polarization, and promoting witch hunts and outrage'.[152] It also keeps personal connection at a remove, and in doing so exacerbates the depersonalization that's already at work when we think of things in binaries.[153] It is us vs. them. But this is an unhelpfully simplistic idea. As Blackford says, '[i]t is rare that any individual or idea is ever wholly good or bad'.[154] Debates are, however, 'by their nature, set up so that one party seeks to win, convincing the audience that they are right. Call out culture as it now exists is fuelled by the need to win, to be right and claim the moral high ground'.[155] Because you can't half-cancel someone.

I'm trying to articulate my concerns about call-out and cancel culture because these are the systems of thought that I am faced with using when it comes to deciding how to rethink my relationship to Wallace, not to mention writing a PhD on the guy. But I still do worry that in criticising these forms of activism I'm really just searching for a way to avoid facing the awkward truth about an author to whom I have a strong attachment. So let me be clear. I do not see the efforts of movements like #MeToo, and the cultural moment that supports these movements, as fruitless. On the contrary, I support the general aims of #MeToo. I also believe that people should be held accountable for their

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[151] There is, of course, a counter-reaction to all this. The National Association of Scholars is one example of an organisation that's railing against cancel culture in higher education. You can find out more here: https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/tracking-cancel-culture-in-higher-education
[152] Blackford, p. 195.
[153] David Brooks, 'The Cruelty of Call-out Culture', (The New York Times, 2019).
[154] Spratt.
[155] Spratt.

behaviour. I can see why calling someone out, or cancelling someone, might present itself as the best option (as kids we're taught to assert ourselves and also to ignore bullies, right?). Revanche has a more hopeful take on call-out culture, and acknowledges that even though 'accusing someone in public of wrongdoing is filled with all kinds of complicated tension . . . the stress and social messiness of such an isolated action should not be confused with the ongoing practices we create over time, the holistic community-building that might prevent violent things from happening'.[156]

Call-outs might be an ineffectual stand-in for actual change in our communities, but that's largely because of how we delegitimize, cheapen and sap serious and urgent social concerns of their value once they enter the news cycle. The news cycle strips these concerns of their nuance and context, to create content that will provoke outrage and sell stories.[157] Once we've been exhausted by the news cycle, by the 'predictable patterns that play out in the mouths of the powerful and well connected,' and the overall 'inaccessibility of this conversation . . . we rarely move forward to consider what options are available to deal with abusive behaviour'.[158] Because these conversations don't provide immediate answers for those of us who want them, it is easy enough to discard the discussion and consider the whole enterprise 'as inconsequential or "broken" – even though accountability is not just a five-minute discussion, nor even a five-year discussion'.[159] The reason it's essential to keep having these conversations is that otherwise we will stay stuck at the stage of calling someone out, leaving all responsibility resting with that person. 'One of the major shortcomings of this type of thinking,' Revanche writes, is how 'it treats acts of discretion as character flaws or incorrect person programming rather than inevitable superstructural manifestations of, for instance, patriarchy . . . Without the proper education, cultural assumptions work tirelessly to turn attention away from societal influences and instead reprimand the individual, attributing moral failure purely to them'.[160]

Still, although call-outs and cancellations may be an imperfect method, 'they can contribute to an ethic that prioritises the safety of victims'.[161] This is important. And though I resist and, frankly, resent the idea that I might be thought of as somehow endorsing Wallace's abusive behaviour towards Karr, simply because I am a fan of his work, and though it makes me uncomfortable to contemplate whether or not I can, as an ethical consumer, continue to read and promote that work, I have no discomfort at all in saying that his treatment of Mary Karr was abusive. And it is not okay—although it is part and parcel of the freedoms of the internet, the same freedoms that allow #MeToo proponents
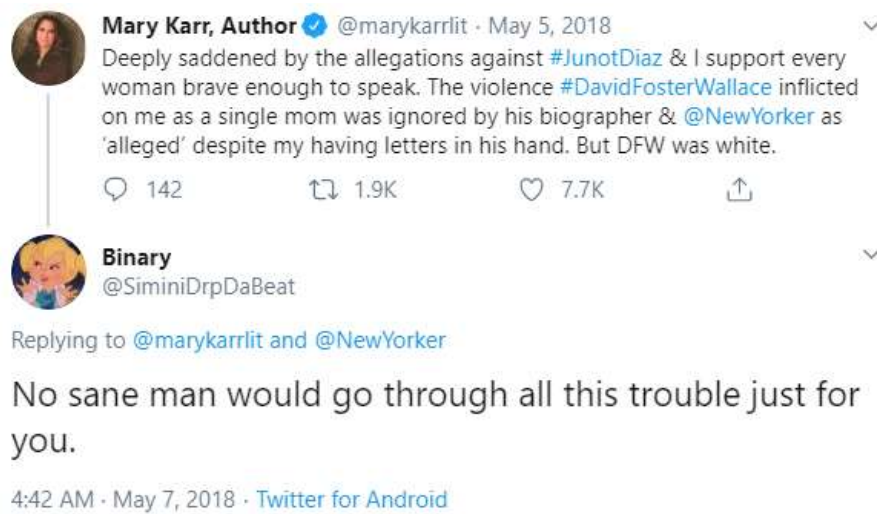
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[156] Revanche.
[157] Revanche.
[158] Revanche.
[159] Revanche.
[160] Revanche.
[161] Revanche.

to tweet—that our current ethic, or lack thereof, breeds the kind of common misogynist bullshit abuse that you see below.[162]

Mary Karr, Author ✔ @marykarrlit · May 5, 2018
Deeply saddened by the allegations against #JunotDiaz & I support every woman brave enough to speak. The violence #DavidFosterWallace inflicted on me as a single mom was ignored by his biographer & @NewYorker as 'alleged' despite my having letters in his hand. But DFW was white.

💬 142   ↻ 1.9K   ♡ 7.7K   ↑

Binary
@SiminiDrpDaBeat

Replying to @marykarrlit and @NewYorker

No sane man would go through all this trouble just for you.

4:42 AM · May 7, 2018 · Twitter for Android

Yes, it all feels a bit futile in the end. And the really defeating thing is that although calling out someone might draw attention to an injustice, cancelling doesn't appear to work. It doesn't seem to actually take effect. As Jared Richards writes:

> According to the *The New York Times*, 'Everyone Is Cancelled', meaning no one really is. Which is true: it's a fact we've had to reckon with as the likes of Louis C.K. return to work once the dust settles, or as West's *Jesus Is King* reaches #1, even as public sentiment towards him is middling at best.[163]

I'd also 'given up' on Kanye West at the end of 2018 (I should clarify here that Kanye wasn't called-out at this time for sexual violence or harassment, but for his political views and behaviour, which, added to everything that's been going on with him since then, is a whole other sticky thing we don't have time to get into and is yet further evidence of why all of this cancellation stuff, in my view, is so complicated and demands to be a case-by-case thing). But I also listened to *Jesus is King* when it finally came out in 2019. As with Wallace, I have an attachment to Kanye that makes the whole process of ethical consumption hard to navigate. And the mixed signals I'm getting, and giving out, about this whole concept of cancellation is that it doesn't really matter in the long run. My memory is short. For people who've been cancelled, 'it's unclear what accountability looks like post-cancellation'. And for those of us who do the cancelling, we have to confront the reality that 'dealing with 'problematic acts' is deeply personal and inevitably flawed, as we outwardly perform an impossible role: the ethical consumer'.[164]

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[162] Binary (@SiminiDrpDaBeat). "No sane man would go through all this trouble just for you." 7 May 2018, 4:42AM. Tweet. https://twitter.com/SiminiDrpDaBeat/status/993206857572474882
[163] Richards.
[164] Richards.

I have to hope, and do my part to see, that Revanche is right in saying that even if positive changes aren't immediate enough, or visible enough, 'these efforts to intervene in violence *are* a big deal. They rise above silence, passivity and inaction, and make peace and wellness in our communities something we work for, not wait for'.[165] Up until 2019, the biggest community event for Wallace folks was the annual conference held at Illinois State University (ISU) in Normal, Illinois. So let's take this opportunity to talk about our community, and what it's working for.

> First, the flyers were defaced. Hung in the hallways of Illinois State University's English department, the message was inked identically on each one: NAH I DON'T LIKE PREDATORS, above the clip-art lobster and below the promise of pizza.
>
> This was mid-October 2017 — post-Weinstein, pre-C.K. The flyers announced an info session for a committee to plan and execute the school's 5th-annual David Foster Wallace Conference. Wallace taught at ISU for nearly a decade; he wrote almost all his major works there, including the 1996 behemoth *Infinite Jest*. He also liked to sleep with his students, was abusive to his girlfriend at the time, the writer Mary Karr (whom he'd tried to push from a moving car not long before moving to Illinois in the summer of 1993, and also once hurled a coffee table at), committed statutory rape while away on book tour (or at least told a friend he did), and wrote to his friend Jonathan Franzen to say that he sometimes thought he was "put on earth to put his penis in as many vaginas as possible."
>
> This stuff had been public knowledge for years (all of the above is drawn from D.T. Max's 2012 Wallace biography, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*). But with Weinstein looped on cable news, Wallace's past behavior seemed freshly reprehensible, and more people were willing to speak out against a school-sanctioned celebration of his work.[166]

What happens to a conference devoted to a man who is now trash in the public imagination? Karr's tweets, added to the other articles about how insufferable Wallace and/or his fans are, have done damage to the community that loves him. Where it didn't do damage within this community, it has alienated it from without. There was about a month between Karr's tweet and DFW18. Ryan Edel, the organiser of the conference, tried to respond to and preempt criticism of running an event devoted to a guy who'd freshly become part of the #MeToo conversation. To my knowledge, Ryan still hasn't finished *Infinite Jest* and his 'ignorance of Wallace . . . extended to the writer's personal life'.[167] In his interview with Kolitz, Ryan said he 'had heard hints of bad behavior, and received at least one strongly worded letter from a member of the ISU community calling him out for "honoring someone who had taken advantage of women, particularly students,"' but that 'stacked against all the deification of Wallace as a world-historical genius/saint, this stuff had failed to fully dent his

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[165] Revanche.
[166] Kolitz.
[167] Kolitz.

consciousness'.[168] As of 2018, Ryan 'couldn't post to the conference's Facebook page without being asked point-blank how he justified celebrating an abuser'.[169] Rather than evade these comments, Ryan 'started personally answering every angry Facebook comment, unambiguously condemning Wallace's behavior in self-searching mini-essays that could run to five or six hundred words.[170]

As I've mentioned, the Wallace conference is held at ISU, where Wallace taught and where he is held in mixed regard by the faculty. Wallace is one, and a big, claim to fame for the university and for Bloomington-Normal. In 2017, the second time I attended the conference, Charlie Harris (a warm and intellectually generous person who hired Wallace to teach at ISU, and who passed away later in 2017) took a group of us up to the fourth floor of Stevenson Hall to see the front door of Wallace's old office. Matt Bucher and Rob Short (board members of the DFW Society and part of the editorial team for *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*—as am I) drove me, as part of a mini-convoy of conference attendees, to see Wallace's old house. We stood on the road and took photos. Inside our conference tote bags there was a purple sheet of paper, printed with a tourist map of Bloomington-Normal, highlighting spots that Wallace frequented. Every corn field I saw, I wondered if it was the corn field Wallace stands alongside in one particular publicity photo I have blown up on cardboard in my office. Conference-goers commented that they thought ISU could do even more to capitalise on the Wallace thing, but not everyone at ISU thinks that's worthwhile. Mandy Webster (@missmandy76) replied to Karr's tweet: 'I work at the university where DFW taught, and they have practically awarded him a sainthood. It's sickening!'[171]

Ryan addressed #MeToo at DFW18. He put flyers on the walls in Stevenson Hall, implemented a #MeToo reporting system for attendees, and tried to respond to comments made on Facebook by friends and colleagues of his who were dissing Wallace and the pedestal ISU put him on. For DFW19, Ryan added an outreach section to the conference website. '[L]et me warn you,' it begins:

> publicizing the DFW Conference is not without complication . . . his treatment of women has led many to view Wallace's fame as simply another sign of the toxic masculinity infecting our culture. Although Wallace was clearly aware of the negative effects of men placing women in secondary social status (such as he addressed in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*), he also took part in those behaviors. As Clare Hayes-Brady put it, Wallace can be considered a 'woke misogynist' – he critiqued the patriarchal nature of our society through his writing, but then also engaged in unacceptable behaviors in his personal life.
>
> We can't ignore his brilliance, but we also can't condone these behaviors. So as we reach out to the public at large to promote our academic conference, we will need to

[168] Kolitz.
[169] Kolitz.
[170] Kolitz.
[171] Mandy Webster (@missmandy76) "I work at the university where DFW taught, and they have practically awarded him a sainthood. It's sickening!" 5 May 2018, 10:02PM. Tweet. https://twitter.com/missmandy76/status/992743952733364224

directly address the sharp social critiques that arise in response to Wallace's personal life. It isn't enough to simply 'justify' the study of Wallace's writing despite his behaviors – we must also be forthright in our efforts to prevent similar abuses from occurring within our own community. Yes, DFW scholars have long been critical of Wallace's behavior – we now must show people outside DFW Studies that we've been having these conversations, and that we are applying the lessons of #MeToo to protect all members of our community.[172]

You can read the rest on the website.[173] As DFW18 approached, choosing whether or not to make this official public response was a source of tension and outright debate in our community, especially among the conference committee and the DFW Society board members (of course, we had these conversations not on Twitter but via our private messaging group on Slack, because see above discussion of call-out and cancel culture). We weren't sure, and in some instances vehemently disagreed, on how to handle, or not, the commentary around Karr's tweets. At the time, I lurked and read the chat history but maintained radio silence, because I was actually a little confused by the anxiety in our group about what to do about Wallace's reputation in the #MeToo era. I'm sure I would've thought, at the time, that any sort of response would be overkill (not to mention self-aggrandizing about our community's importance or authority). After all, Wallace was his own person, we were our own people—I failed to see a connection between us and his past behaviour, beyond that we liked to read and study his work. But still, fair or not, there were numerous stories among us of being confronted by people expecting us to account for his behaviour, and to justify (if not make apologies for) why we would continue to engage with his work.

I don't think that in 2018 I grasped the responsibilities of my role in this community. A lot of the time I've felt that my involvement in the more formal sides to this community have mostly just been a good excuse to catch up with my friends, and to satiate my own appetite for continued conversations about Wallace and his work. But the reality is that in being involved in this community my support of Wallace and his writing (support in the general sense of 'I like it') is no longer only personal, it's a public statement. I am still, in 2020, a board member of the DFW Society and I am on the editorial board for *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*. I was also involved in organising the 2020 Wallace conference in Austin, Texas.[174] As someone who actively promotes his work and makes efforts to sustain a field of research devoted to him, there are different questions of responsibility to consider. And while I was resolute about that Wallace being dead meant that the matter of his behaviour may as well be dead, too (or only a scholarly footnote), I neglected to think about the community that keeps his work and his legacy alive. Nor did I really understand, back then, that the #MeToo stuff we were confronting wasn't about Wallace only.

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[172] Ryan Edel, 'Cautionary Notes: Wallace's Reputation and #Metoo', (2018)."
[173] Edel.
[174] Which, thanks to COVID-19, has been postponed until 2022.

It is true that, since Wallace is dead, he can neither repeat nor atone for his behaviour. But what I am only beginning to wrap my head around is that Wallace was, in part, able to behave the way he did because of larger institutional and societal structures that did not succeed in preventing that behaviour, and often actively enabled it to pass without consequences. When Wallace was called-out, our collective attention went to disavowing him. As one member of our group on Slack pointed out, and to echo my earlier discussion of call-out culture, it's good to reckon with Wallace's bad behaviour, but if we stop at only calling him (or any single person) out, we will do little to actually change the institutions that sustain and excuse this behaviour.

I still don't think it's our job to apologise, or even to account, for Wallace. But there are real, practicable things we can do, and that we are doing, to actively work towards a better culture for our immediate community (we're still trying to shake our reputation for being an in-group of white, bearded lit-bros—an image problem that, though not totally baseless, does not reflect the diversity of our members who, as of late 2019, number over 300 from 23 different countries) and for academia more broadly. Whether his views reflected those held by most of the community or not, Ryan did much of this work for DFW18 and DFW19. The DFW Society has also consistently worked to make our community welcoming and safe. But this is new and uncertain territory, and attempts to find a way forward, like the initial reception to our Society's diversity statement,[175] are likely to look kinda clumsy, if not forced, and to be kinda messy. But you do what you can and you learn on the job. These are efforts worth making.

During Clare's keynote at DFW18, Matt Bucher turned to me and asked: 'Do you think Wallace is a misogynist?' He asked me this shortly after showing me the proofs of the first issue of *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, something that our editorial board had been working towards for over a year, and after Clare had also asked, in her presentation: 'Can we as readers justify time spent on the creative output of artists whose ethical actions we find lacking?'[176] The answer to these two questions kind of determines the value, and the legitimacy, of the work we do in this community. If we answer yes to Matt's question, and then no to Clare's, what's the point of what we do?

I paused, shook my head and said no, and we were both satisfied with that answer. Thinking about it, I wondered if I'd said no as a reflex, giving Matt the answer I knew he (any fan of Wallace, including myself) wanted to hear, especially from, given the context, a woman. I don't think I did. But I don't know if, had I felt differently, I would have said so. For me as much as for Matt, I want the answer to be no. It wasn't a question designed to corner me; Matt genuinely wanted to know what I thought. I think he was distressed that Wallace kept being talked about in this way. Because what does it say about the thing he loves, the thing he gives his time and effort to? And then what might it say about him? I ask these same questions of myself.

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[175] This is discussed at greater length in the final essay of this collection: 'What it's like in David-Foster-Wallace-Land'.

[176] Hayes-Brady, p. 2.

I have realised that my want for it to be okay to read Wallace is, by now, more about my love for and protectiveness of the community I have found through his work than it is about having permission to continue reading Wallace—though that remains a point of uncertainty for me. I think there's a lot of value and ethical potential in our community, and we are doing our best to reckon with Wallace, rather than cancelling him. Call-out culture doesn't yet seem to have the attention span and generosity to account for this, focussed as it is on the individual, and communities are worse off for it.

But it's also not just about the community. If it were only about the people I've found through Wallace, there'd be no real need for any of what I've written here. Reading or not reading Wallace, by now, is not what my friendships with these people hinge on. What this is also about is that I think there's value and ethical potential in Wallace's work, too, despite his problematic status. It's about that I think there are reasons to keep the legacy of his work alive. The details of those reasons have their own place, elsewhere in this collection.

When Karr tweeted in May of 2018, I slowly understood that my existing project on Wallace had stalled. I couldn't move forward with it until I worked out if I could still be a fan of Wallace and what my responsibility, as a fan, is. This two-part question has overwhelmed my research and overtaken my thesis. We all have our problematic fave. What do we do about it? Jenny Sinclair, in her article 'After #metoo, I'm left confused by 'call-out' culture,' asks:

> How badly do we need to consume art made by perpetrators? Perhaps there's enough great art out there that we can get what we need from non-abusive creators. But could we do without Picasso? Earlier this year, the Art Gallery of Ballarat staged an exhibition of Picasso prints. The gallery felt moved to add a public discussion of the artist's treatment of women, but the exhibition itself was not in question. Picasso . . . is too big to cancel. I don't mourn the supposed innocence of a time when artists and their art were separated. That time never really existed. Personas and personalities have always been part of the reception – and marketing – of art and music. And I won't use the cliché about no one being perfect, because some acts are clearly unforgivable. I'm just struggling with the disconnect between what I feel – the urge to move my feet to the beat, my response to the fluid line of a Picasso sketch – and what I know. I wonder about the grace beauty can bring to our lives, even if its source is questionable. Where to draw that line between unforgivable acts and human fallibility.[177]

I don't know. I don't know.

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[177] Sinclair.

Authority and Academia (I)

In 2018 I think I lost faith in academia. Academia, for its part, was already in its own crisis of faith, especially the Humanities.[178] Depending on what you take 'crisis' to mean or look like, academia may be pathologically in crisis.[179] The crisis that I was aware of, and one that weighed on both academia and my own aspirations to be a scholar, was (and still is) to do with the corporatisation of universities.[180] Thanks to higher education's apparent capitulation to the forces of neoliberalism, those of us working in colleges and universities were no longer teaching students, we were providing a service (and a product, in the form of a degree) to paying consumers.

The language of consumerism was seeping into everything that year, as I remember it. In 2018, beyond internal gripes about universities becoming businesses etcetera, this language was most publicly and emphatically pronounced in terms of ethics, related in particular to the #MeToo movement and a rash of public figures that, owing to this movement and to call-out/cancel culture, were now problematic. The ethical consumer was a figure that obtruded in conversations about all our newly problematic faves. That year, the label of problematic fave was being slapped on lots of people and things, and in many cases this seemed unequivocally just and overdue. But what seemed to be happening at the same time was that the label of problematic was not affixed to the 'fave' alone—it also applied to the people who supported that person or thing. The onus was on the fan of a problematic fave to justify their continued investment in that person or that thing. The fan had a responsibility to be an ethical consumer. This in and of itself doesn't seem unfair. If I want to be an ethical consumer, and I do, that responsibility should fall on me. What seemed different in 2018 though was that this motivation no longer felt intrinsically motivated; instead, motivation seemed more extrinsic, and more about avoiding being publicly shamed.

As an aspiring academic, there was also, that year, an amorphous but very much 'there' pressure on scholars and teachers to be ethical providers. This pressure, one that has likely always been there to some degree, insisted that who and what we read, studied, and then taught, should in some way respond to the cultural moment. A movement like #MeToo seeks change, socially and structurally. Silence is not an option. Not a progressive one, anyway. So, for example, when David Foster Wallace was hashtagged as part of #MeToo by Mary Karr, who'd tweeted in May that year to

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[178] See, as just a few examples from across the years: John Guillory, 'Valuing the Humanities, Evaluating Scholarship', *Profession,* (2005); Paul Jay, *The Humanities "Crisis" and the Future of Literary Studies,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014); Christopher Breu, 'The Humanities as Contradiction: Against the New Enclosures', *Humanities,* 7 (2018).

[179] For more on this, see: Eric Hayot, 'Then and Now', in *Critique and Postcritique,* ed. by Rita Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 279-95.

[180] Adjunct to this were the bleak job prospects, casualization of labour and exploitation of that labour, and the sense, in the end, that to get into and be successful at academia would mean always moving the goalpost forward, if you were lucky enough to be playing the game in the first place.

remind the world that Wallace had been abusive to her, the question of whether academics could justify giving their time and attention to his work was raised.[181]

The tenor of some of these conversations within the academy mirrored (albeit in a coolly distanced sort of way) the sentiments of online articles such as Deirdre Coyle's 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me' and Megan Garber's 'David Foster Wallace and the Dangerous Romance of Male Genius,' whose authors called for a rejection of Wallace's work, and petitioned fans to disavow him as one of their favourite authors. Academics who were more hesitant in their approach suggested we needed to keep teaching Wallace, to problematise and contextualise and critique him and his work—we were now to teach Wallace with an asterisk by his name: *He's one of the problematic ones.

I believe in this latter response, the one that comes with the asterisk. The scholarly argument that we shouldn't boycott or 'cancel' an author like David Foster Wallace because that only serves to close off new and worthwhile conversations about his work is, I think, valid. But for me, and at that time, this response felt insufficient. If I were to add this asterisk to my research on Wallace, I would have acknowledged my responsibility as a Wallace scholar; this asterisk wouldn't, however, force me to think through my ongoing attachment to Wallace. It wouldn't force me to consider my responsibilities as a consumer and as a fan, or my values as a woman and as a writer.

In 2015, I began a doctoral thesis on David Foster Wallace. I wanted to look at ideas of adolescence in his work. My suspicion was that Wallace believed adolescence to be a good metaphor for the maturity levels of US citizens. I'd collected evidence from across his works where he used the language of adolescence to describe Americans and their relationship to their government and civic duties. I wanted to use this evidence to a) prove that I was right about what I'd read into Wallace's work and b) to show how these ideas might be applied more broadly to US citizens in real life. I proposed that Wallace's work, especially *The Pale King*, could function as more than social commentary; I thought that Wallace provided a model, with a degree of workability, for how US citizens might grow up and behave like adults. And yeah, I know how presumptuous and pompous that project looks on paper.

The details of this project are no longer important. It had many issues that I only later recognised. I spent four years working on it, attending conferences off the back of my research proposals, receiving funding for same. I got a Fulbright scholarship for this work. I believed in this project until I didn't. If this sounds harsh, perhaps it is. It would be more measured of me to say that I realised I had a different project to complete, that I felt I couldn't not complete, in place of the one I'd been working on for years, but the truth is also that I no longer believed in this original project

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[181] Amy Hungerford, Professor of English at Yale University, was one scholar who answered in the negative, declaring her refusal to read and to teach Wallace in her classroom. See: Amy Hungerford, 'On Refusing to Read', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (2016).

because I think I'd come to the uncomfortable realisation that I was trying to do something with literary criticism that might be beyond its purview, or at least its skill set. The only relevance this project has for me today is that my eventual abandonment of it was driven by the same confusion that has led me to write this essay. The other thing worth mentioning in relation to the above is that the project, especially as regards its purview, was ambitious. As my supervisors kept reminding me, I should have been doing literary criticism, but what I wanted to do was to make an intervention; I wanted to change the world. My inability, and my concerns about literary criticism's inability, to do this were a source of frustration I spent a lot of time ignoring, until I couldn't.

I continue to have trouble working out how to feel about this abandoned project. I think I could have executed a fine thesis on Wallace and adolescence if I'd been prepared to stick to literary criticism. And maybe that would have been worthwhile. It would have allowed me to finish my degree within the three years that's now being insisted upon in higher education, rather than starting afresh in 2019, with eighteen drawn-out months left to my candidature.

When I was little, I remember being in a car with my dad, telling him I was going to write a book one day that would be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Even at that age I knew books changed lives, and I wanted in on this. It seemed germane to my ambitions to go off and study creative writing at university, so I did—and that, incidentally, was when I first read Wallace, and his books changed my life. But even a degree in creative writing is only partially devoted to creating writing; most of my tertiary education has been in literary criticism. And I remain less convinced that literary criticism changes lives.

Maybe this kind of general statement seems unfair or even unclear or contradictory. After all, this essay, its form and content, suggests I've found a productive literary-critical-creative space to write in (at least, a space that feels productive to me). But this is only the case because I've taken a non-traditional approach to my scholarly writing, and this is an approach I've had to be careful to justify throughout this collection of essays.[182] So in this sense, traditional literary criticism does feel limited and limiting to me—of course, I really mean this with specific reference to the context about and in which I'm writing. As of 2018 I didn't know how to use literary criticism to deal with Wallace's problematic behaviour. It seemed like the latter had an effect on the former, but that literary criticism was less equipped to respond to the latter. There was a disconnect, or so it seemed to me, between doing feminist critique of Wallace's work vs. dealing with the misogyny in his biography. Maybe you don't think it's the job of literary criticism to do this latter kind of work. I think I feel differently.

Which I suppose leads me to ask: what do we want literary criticism to do? And for whom?

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[182] Especially as an emerging scholar who doesn't have the safety to experiment that more established and tenured academics might enjoy.

This essay is the product of my confusion about, and wariness of, how we 'do' criticism. Very specifically, this is about the criticism that appears in literary studies, but I am inclined to extend these feelings of confusion and wariness to include criticism that happens in more public spaces, especially online. What all this has to do with David Foster Wallace and #MeToo is complicated. One way to describe what 2018 felt like would be to invoke a cliché and say that it was like being caught between a rock and a hard place. The rock was the Total Noise and deluge of opinion and hot takes online. The hard place was academia, and a growing awareness of the disconnect between the scholarship being produced in literary studies and what was going on Out There.

This story begins back in 2008, more or less. It was in this year that Rita Felski published *Uses of Literature*. The book was a manifesto, sort of, and it seemed set to change the landscape of literary criticism with something called postcritique. The 'post' in postcritique implies that it came after another something. This other something is 'critique', which itself is part of a larger complicated story involving another other thing called Theory.

So okay. Our story, then, really begins decades earlier.

Technically, Theory could be said to have multiple beginnings that span the entire twentieth century, but, taking my cue from Eric Hayot, whose account of this period I find clear and thoughtful, the Theory to which I am referring became a consolidated movement in the 1970s and 80s, in American universities.[183] 'The Theory era', a.k.a. the era of critique,[184] 'swept through the entire American university system, affecting not only literature departments but units across the humanities and social sciences'.[185] Theory changed 'patterns and practices of teaching' and it also 'affected the structure of the university itself,' giving birth to new and diverse programs; this era gave us ethnic studies, women's studies, gender studies, and queer studies, among others.[186] Theory produced new and diverse schools of thought. Feminists, Marxists, psychoanalytic critics, deconstructionists, Foucauldian historicists, so on and etcetera, were all deploying Theory, a form of ideological critique, to read literary texts. This style of critique demanded a specific kind of reading, one that was against the grain and between the lines, and one that was highly suspicious of the text itself. Theory was 'the process of reflecting on the underlying frameworks, principles, and assumptions that shape our individual acts of interpretation'.[187] The point of such a reading was to force us to recognise how interpretation shapes our world. By revealing the frameworks, principles, and assumptions that were hidden in our reading, it was meant to follow that we would be in a better position to challenge the

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[183] Hayot, p. 280.
[184] Hayot, p. 287.
[185] Hayot, p. 280.
[186] Hayot, p. 280.
[187] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 2.

status quo and create a world that was more equal and socially just. Critique, in this sense, was utopian in thought. Performing a postcolonial reading of *Jane Eyre* was meant to be more than just novel, it was meant to *do* something, however ineffable, about colonialism.

The appeal of critique lay, also, in how it legitimated literary studies as a 'serious academic discipline'.[188] Critique allowed literary studies to shake off its 'belle-lettristic associations' and associate itself instead with a rigorous methodology.[189] 'The detachment and distance cultivated in critique,' Ronan McDonald says, 'imparted a sense of solid knowledge acquisition, a dispassionate and serious attitude that chimed with the protocols of the modern university. In other words, symptomatic criticism unified literary studies, offering both methodological rigour through hermeneutics and ethical seriousness through ideological critique'.[190] This is perhaps why critique is so feted in our discipline, and why scholars are reluctant to see it displaced as our dominant approach to reading.

I could just be projecting, but I think many of us in the humanities, and especially literary studies, suffer from disciplinary cringe. Like cultural cringe (which, take it from an Australian, is a real phenomenon), disciplinary cringe reflects how literary criticism has an internalised inferiority complex about what it 'does' in comparison to other, usually scientific, disciplines. Whether this causes scholars to deprecate or (in an act of compensation) exaggerate the impact of their work, literary studies always seems to have to find new ways of justifying its existence as a discipline. Sometimes this is in response to a real and external demand for justification, sometimes it's just a preemptive defence against its own fears of redundancy.

I'm sure there are well-adjusted literary studies scholars who know the value as well as the limits of their work. But for scholars who came of age in the era of Theory, they were promised something more. I can see my own ambitions for my work as a literary scholar in the wake of this era. Critique has, for a long time, raised literary studies' disciplinary profile. Critique says that what we do matters, that what we do has a visible and felt impact. And in our current higher education climate, where impact and engagement are our new KPIs, this is essential to the survival of the humanities and to our job prospects.

The above summary/diatribe doesn't adequately render, however, what it was like for scholars who went to university and graduated in those Theoretical years. Hayot describes his time at college as '*exciting*':[191]

> My classmates and I, reading these amazing books and unlearning everything we
> thought we'd known, felt like we were on the verge of making a significant
> difference, not just in school, but on the planet: a difference in the field of political

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[188] Ronan McDonald, 'Critique and Anti-Critique', *Textual Practice: Literature and Contingency,* 32 (2018), 370.
[189] McDonald, p. 370.
[190] McDonald, p. 370.
[191] Hayot, p. 281. (emphasis original)

economy and social power, in relations between men and women and the possibilities inherent in the production and performance of sexuality (and the possibility of a significant politics therein), in the radical undermining of the kinds of truth that had, until then, given us an all-too-imperfect world.[192]

Using Theory to critique texts, scholars felt they were 'engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work'.[193] It was an era of great promise.

But, writing a couple of decades after being in graduate school, Hayot concedes, '[i]t is in the nature of idealisms to disappoint. You start out planning to change the world; you end up teaching in a university, changing one small thing or another in yourself, your students, or the curriculum, while the world goes on without you'.[194] Which isn't to say that it was impossible to effect change. Many scholars did—perhaps through their involvement in making space for queer theory in academia, or through the rewriting of US curricula 'to include engagement with the bleak, inspiring history of ethnic struggle, or with the fight for women's rights' (changes that would be 'radical and huge' to someone like Hayot, 'who in his American high school English classes never read a single book written by a woman, or a person of color'). [195] But, Hayot says, '[i]n the long run, though, those changes haven't felt like enough, in the face of all the things that haven't changed'.[196]

Eventually, Theory was said to be dead.[197] Although this 'death' might more reasonably be described as a period of disappointment in Theory's apparent inability to do what it said it could do.[198] What emerged from this in the longer term was the idea that critique—a term used almost interchangeably with Theory by this point—was in crisis. And this brings us back to Rita Felski and her manifesto.

'There is a dawning sense among literary and cultural critics,' Felski wrote back in 2008, 'that a shape of thought has grown old'.[199] Ideological critique was no longer radical; it was the new status quo. Critique had lost its potency and become something else. As a practice that was to some degree predicated on finding oppression at work in literary texts, critique had taken on a habitually paranoid disposition and became (or so it appeared to many postcritical scholars) a means to a predetermined end—critique insisted that oppression was there in a text, it just had to be rooted out by the critic. Critique was now a mechanical set of reading practices that were militant about interrogating literary

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[192] Hayot, p. 281.
[193] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, (Chicago : The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 2.
[194] Hayot, p. 282.
[195] Hayot, p. 282.
[196] Hayot, p. 282.
[197] For a more detailed discussion of what this actually means, Hayot suggests reading: D. N. Rodowick's *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) and François Cusset's *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[198] Hayot, p. 283.
[199] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 1.

texts for hidden meanings—for all intents and purposes it had become a synonym for 'a hermeneutics of suspicion'.[200]

This phrase, originally French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's, is one that Felski appropriated it in her later work, *The Limits of Critique* (2015), to help describe 'the role of suspicion in literary criticism: its pervasive presence as mood and method'.[201] Felski likes Ricoeur's phrase for how it 'throws fresh light on a diverse range of practices that are often grouped under the rubric of critique: symptomatic reading, ideology critique, Foucauldian historicism, various techniques of scanning texts for signs of transgression or resistance'.[202] These practices combine to give critique a fundamental quality of 'againstness'.[203] Taking a similar view, Toril Moi writes that '[t]o engage in critique is to expose ideology and the workings of power, encourage resistance, and generally contribute to social and political change. Practitioners of critique must therefore be fundamentally suspicious of anything that appears to be ordinary and commonsensical, and anything that presents itself as an "established fact," including the so-called facts of the text'.[204] This mission statement demands that the critic 'read against the grain and between the lines; their self-appointed task is to draw out what a text fails—or willfully refuses—to see'.[205] For Felski, a hermeneutics of suspicion captured 'the spirit of modern thought',[206] and she wanted to bring this spirit into question, claiming that 'the intellectual or political payoff of interrogating, demystifying, and defamiliarizing [was] no longer quite so self-evident'.[207] Theory's strength had been in its diversity of thought, but ideologies were now being run through critique's well-oiled machinery, churning out feminist, Marxist, poststructuralist, etc., readings that, despite coming from drastically different schools of thought, felt all too familiar. The problem was twofold. Critique had become the dominant way of reading, and in defaulting to critique literary scholars produced homogenised criticism. This was compounded by how critique had also become narrow in its scope. In becoming conflated with a hermeneutics of suspicion, critique was no longer an umbrella term for a variety of possible approaches (including affective orientations) to reading, it came instead to represent a single style of interpretation 'driven by a spirit of disenchantment'.[208] Critique, in other words, was always in a bad mood.

Critique prides itself on being suspicious and negative and critically detached—this is a defensive orientation to the world that, among other functions, assures the critic she will not be fooled

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[200] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 1.
[201] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 1.
[202] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp. 2-3.
[203] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 129.
[204] Toril Moi, '"Nothing Is Hidden" from Confusion to Clarity; or, Wittgenstein on Critique', in *Critique and Postcritique,* ed. by Rita Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 31-49 (p. 31).
[205] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 1.
[206] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 1.
[207] Rita Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker, 'Introduction', in *Critique and Postcritique,* ed. by Rita Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 1-28 (p. 1).
[208] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 2.

by a text (which I find entirely comprehensible, I don't think anybody likes to be taken for a fool).
The more detached the critic, the more able, in theory, she is to see and understand what a text is
'doing'. Critique has thus become associated with a specific intellectual persona, one 'that is highly
prized in literary studies and beyond: suspicious, knowing, self-conscious, hardheaded, tirelessly
vigilant'.[209] When you're railing against the status quo, it simply will not do to be anything less than
on guard. For staunch advocates of this kind of critique, the negativity of their practice transmutes
'into a halo effect—an aura of rigor and probity that burnishes its dissident stance with a normative
glow'.[210] And in the current climate of higher education, in which we are witnessing 'an extended
assault on the autonomy of universities: a growing emphasis on profit and utility at the expense of
humanistic inquiry, declining state support for the liberal arts, the adjunctification of the professoriate,
and the quantification of scholarly thought and research',[211] to be anything less than oppositional (that
is, to do anything less than critique) suggests 'consent to, and co-option by, a larger system'.[212] In this
line of thinking, to 'refuse critique' would be 'to sink into the mire of complacency, credulity, and
conservatism'.[213] This makes an intimidating case for critique. As Felski says, 'Who would want to be
associated with the bad smell of the uncritical?'[214]

Enter postcritique. Postcritique is a broad church, but the thing that most postcritical scholars have in
common is their vested interest in exploring other ways to interpret literary texts.[215] More specifically,
postcritique is about exploring ways of reading that aren't (or aren't required to be) suspicious or
detached. How a literary studies scholar goes about doing this is intentionally left open.[216] As Felski
writes, 'the vagueness of the term [is] its singular strength, allowing it to serve as a placeholder for
emerging ideas and barely glimpsed possibilities'.[217] Postcritique, therefore, does not 'prescribe the
forms that reading should take,' nor does it 'dictate the attitudes that critics must adopt',[218] rather it
makes space for a plurality of approaches to reading that are not confined by traditional ideas of a
critic being objective and distanced from their object of study.[219] As you can see, this leaves a lot of
scope for interpretation and experimentation, which makes providing a singular definition of
postcritique slippery at best. Amid these indeterminacies you may also be wondering what all this has
to do with Wallace. For my purposes, there are a few precise ways in which I am using postcritique to

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[209] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 6.
[210] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 8.
[211] Felski and Anker, p. 17.
[212] Felski and Anker, p. 17.
[213] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 8.
[214] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 8.
[215] Felski and Anker, p. 1.
[216] Felski and Anker, p. 1.
[217] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 173.
[218] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 173.
[219] Felski and Anker, p. 2.

wrestle with my Wallace problem. The first of these is the admittance of the personal and the subjective to my approach to Wallace; instead of assuming my intense attachment to Wallace and his work undermines my ability to be critical of him, I acknowledge and explore this attachment to better understand why his abusive behaviour poses an ethical problem for readers. The second way in which postcritique lends itself to this project is in how it makes space for other readers' affective responses to him and his work; Wallace has consistently inspired intense reactions from fans and critics alike, and understanding the role of emotion and affect in our choice to read him or not is especially important here, more on which soon. Relatedly, the third way in which I use postcritique in this project is by taking it beyond literary studies and using it as a method for intervening in the conversations we're having now around how, or if, we can, or should, separate the artist from their art. This is perhaps not a new problem, but it's certainly a newly pressing problem thanks to cancel culture. As we continually discover that our favourite artists are flawed, and as we are faced with the choice of whether to continue or refuse to engage with their art, postcritique affords a new way of understanding the ongoing value (or, depending on your perspective, the moral bankruptcy) of an author like Wallace and what that means for his legacy. If I were to use critique in these conditions, I would be encouraged to separate the artist from their art and to remain detached from the value judgments I make of their work. This is something that I am incapable of doing, despite my best intentions, and to pretend otherwise would be disingenuous. The fourth and final point I'd like to make with reference to critique and why it's not the tool for this job is that I don't think the chronic negativity of critique is particularly productive or informative in this context. In fact, to be frank, I think it is potentially harmful. Let me explain.

It's possible that critique, as Felski describes it, is not as endemic to literary studies as we think (certainly there are scholars who quarrel with this generalisation).[220] But at this point, with all that's been written on it, it's impossible to deny that something about critique isn't working for a good number of scholars. At this point it is also clear that something about postcritique *is* reenergizing these scholars and their investment in literary studies.

To be postcritical, Felski writes, 'is to de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions of inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism—thereby freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument' (e.g. what would change if we approached interpretation from a place of love, rather than suspicion?).[221] We need to question our assumption that 'the purpose of literary studies [is] to produce critique, and that to do so, one [has] to practice some form of the "hermeneutics of suspicion"'.[222] Felski asks: 'Why is critique so

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[220] See, for example: Diana Fuss, 'But What About Love?', *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America,* 132 (2017), 353-54.
[221] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 3.
[222] Moi, p. 31.

frequently feted as the most serious and scrupulous form of thought?[223] What intellectual and imaginative alternatives does it overshadow, obscure, or overrule? And what are the costs of such ubiquitous criticality?'[224]

It's not that critique is inherently bad or that it should be abandoned. Its utopian ambitions and mindfulness of social justice have been valuable and still hold value for literary studies. 'The "something" that is wrong with critique,' Christopher Castiglia says, 'is not its desire to criticize social injustice, but its disposition, the attitude with which critique is approached. It may not be "critique" that has outlived its usefulness, in other words, but the dispositions that have become customary, even mandatory, to carry it out'.[225] In literary studies '[t]he negative has become inescapably, overbearingly, normative'.[226] Sara Callahan writes that when critique is practiced this way, scholars, steeped as they are in negativity, are only good for tearing things down, rather than building them up, and anything 'that does not stand up to the current era's identity politics' is subject to this deconstructive critical gaze.[227]

So big deal. I'm not sure many people outside of literary studies care all that much. But I posit that this habitual negativity has consequences that stretch beyond literary studies. I think the 'problem' with critique extends beyond how we read and talk and write about a book, and I'd like to take this conversation beyond academia. I want to suggest to you that there is a real, if complex and not entirely straightforward, connection between the negativity of critique and the kind of criticism you'll encounter online, including criticism that may be described as contributing to something like cancel culture. The way that we deal with a problematic fave like David Foster Wallace is not divorced from the suspicious mood (which mood, if you recall critique's identification with progressive politics, is itself bound up in issues of ethics and social justice) that has become the *doxa* of critique.[228] Without claiming that the way we do literary studies has on its own created the intellectual and emotional climate for something like cancel culture (I have enough of my own disciplinary cringe that I think that may be too self-aggrandizing a claim to make, anyway), I do want to point out the similarities between critical thinking in the academy and in the wider public. I began this essay talking in part about the disconnect between scholarship being produced in literary studies and what was going on Out There, but I think these two things might have some not altogether flattering things in common.

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[223] This feting of critique is often implicit in scholarship, and evident through our continued deferral to it as a practice of reading, but for more explicit defenses of critique, you might read, for starters: Carolyn Lesjak, 'Reading Dialectically', *Criticism,* 55 (2013); Bruce Robbins, 'Not So Well Attached', *PMLA. Publications of the Modern Language Association of America,* 132 (2017); Breu.
[224] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 5.
[225] Christopher Castiglia, 'Hope for Critique?', in *Critique and Postcritique,* ed. by Rita Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 211-29 (p. 212).
[226] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 1.
[227] Sara Callahan, 'Critique and Post-Critique in Contemporary Art History: Excessive Attachment to Suspicion in Academia and Beyond', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education,* (2019), 2.
[228] Moi, p. 47.

In his article, 'Beyond Critical Thinking,' Michael Roth shares his concerns that in teaching critique as our modus operandi in literary studies we reproduce the bad habits associated with critique in our students, which they then take with them out into the world beyond university. Roth writes that in teaching our students to adopt a paranoid and critical stance (and in teaching them that this is synonymous with intellectual rigour) they learn that the 'way to show that one has sharpened one's critical thinking is to display an ability to see through or undermine statements made by (or beliefs held by) others'.[229] The implicit lesson here is that to disbelieve is smart, and the risk is that, in a weird roundabout way, we might train our students to be narrowminded. 'Once outside the university,' Roth continues, 'students continue to score points by displaying the critical prowess for which they were rewarded in school,' and these students end up 'contributing to a cultural climate that has little tolerance for finding or making meaning, whose intellectuals and cultural commentators delight in being able to show that somebody else is not to be believed'.[230] Roth suggests that this kind of education in critique gives students 'reasons to remain guarded—which can translate into reasons not to learn,' and that this 'confident refusal to be affected by those with whom we disagree seems to have infected much of our cultural life: from politics to the press, from siloed academic programs (no matter how multidisciplinary) to warring public intellectuals'.[231] This confident refusal may be seen, for example, in the replies to a tweet. It may be seen in the total rejection of an author's work once that author is deemed problematic. It may be seen in the sanctioning of a problematic man's legacy, despite a woman's testimony of her experience of abuse at the hands of that man.

I have been wondering why postcritique seems to be so popular right now. I can't speak for all scholars, but for me the 'why now' is very much connected to my unease at how the negativity of critique seems to be the norm in the academy, and how this negativity (whether because of critique or simply coincident with what's happening in the academy, or some measure of both) bleeds into the way we talk to each other online and in real life. At a very basic level, postcritique resonates with me because I feel overwhelmed and confused and worried nearly all of the time by everything that's going on that seems to need my attention, and postcritique simply feels better, more optimistic and flexible than the bottomless and rigid negativity that's also there screaming 'LOOK AT ME!'—I know negativity can be necessary and productive or generative, but the negativity that seems most common today is the kind that is scattershot, the kind that shames, judges, fatigues, the kind that doesn't feel instructive or motivating so much as it makes me want to disconnect entirely. I'm aware that it is a privilege to disconnect entirely. But I don't feel *useful* when I feel this way. I feel

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[229] Michael Roth, 'Beyond Critical Thinking', *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* (2010) <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Beyond-Critical-Thinking/63288> [accessed 20 June 2019].
[230] Roth.
[231] Roth.

paralysed. Postcritique, on the other hand, makes me feel like I can create something, rather than only tear things down. And for right now, it also feels functional, a counterbalance to the negativity that inflects how we talk about things and how we talk to each other both in literary studies and the wider world.

I'm mindful that postcritique might just be in fashion—it's new, exciting, promising, it feels radical, in that it feels like a departure from a status quo—and that trends come and go and eventually something else will come along, new or old, original or unoriginal, and be the 'new thing', and postcritique will fade, maybe. And then I'll be the academic (if I can get a job in academia) criticising this 'new thing'. Hayot writes that we should be aware of 'the temporality of intellectual fashion,' and that 'we ought to understand this movement or these changes as themselves part of a general pattern of development . . . a pattern of emergence, dominance, and decline that typifies the general development and institutionalization of ideas in the last forty years'.[232] 'This doesn't mean that one cannot move beyond critique, or change one's ideas,' Hayot says, but rather than think that with postcritique we break from critique, we should 'imagine ourselves a relation to the disappointing past that would be essentially *continuous*'.[233]

Although the idea of being continuous with a disappointing past is deflating, I'll admit there's some comfort in this for me. I can easily become fixated on this idea of legacy—that I need to leave something behind that will change the world, that'll stand the test of time. I can easily become fixated on the idea that this legacy is something I create by myself, for others, rather than working with others to create a legacy (or acknowledging that there's nothing, really, that I create entirely by myself and without help). I can also easily become fixated on the idea that there is one right answer—e.g. postcritique is *the solution forever*—rather than admitting that changing circumstances tend to keep our responses to things in a state of flux. Postcritique feels like *a* solution for this specific time, this specific problem. But of course it isn't the only solution; critique still has, as Hayot writes, 'the power to create hope, to alter relations to the world, [and] to be suspicious also of the ways in which we do not challenge ourselves enough to rethink the basic historical presumptions that we allow to govern us'.[234]

And I'll admit that this idea of postcritique being apolitical and uncritical and naïve—it worries me. Even if this is a crude understanding of what postcritique seeks to do, I'm sure that, done badly, postcritical scholarship could look like that. And I worry about being *that* way at *this* point in time. When the world is on fire, which, as of mid-2020, it appears to be, is postcritique the direction we want to head in? Diana Fuss's article 'What about Love?' makes me hesitate. Fuss 'began reading *The Limits of Critique* with great interest and enthusiasm a few days before the 2016 [US] presidential

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[232] Hayot, p. 289.
[233] Hayot, p. 289.
[234] Hayot, p. 294.

election. [She] finished reading the book a few days after with considerably more unease'.[235] Her mood, she writes, 'had darkened,' and Felski's book, 'which at first had seemed so right for the moment, felt suddenly and dramatically out of sync with the times, like a relic from the Obama era, striking themes of hope, opportunity, and optimism, when all I could feel was despair, disappointment, and dread'.[236] 'In a new age of what can only be called outlandish indifference to truth,' Fuss writes, 'should we be actively working to demote critique, an interpretative method with a proven track record of calling out and calling to account purveyors of false and pernicious narratives?'[237]

Four years later and I'm still not sure. Is it ethical to be postcritical, to talk about love or other warm and fuzzy feelings rather than being oppositional all the time? Is it selfish? Is it premature? Perhaps critique isn't a shape of thought that's grown old, maybe I'm just obsessed with the new. Newness brings new promises that aren't yet fulfilled or unfulfilled—they are just potentiality, which is exciting and hopeful. And maybe it's not just that critique has limited usefulness in literary studies, but that it's limited in how it serves scholars in a neoliberal system. The crisis in critique takes on a different gloss when we think of it as being related to changes that are occurring outside the problem of critique.[238] Bruce Robbins writes that our 'crisis' is less to do with critique being an exhausted or limited methodology and more a reaction to the collapse of the job market in academia; if critique 'makes the enterprise of criticism seem meaningful,' he writes, then 'when the job market is so apocalyptically dried up, I can see why even quite reasonable claims for the meaningfulness of criticism might come to seem overinflated'.[239] Hayot says that, for some of his friends, 'this institutional crisis, itself produced by the enormous cuts in state funding for higher education over the last decades, counts as further evidence for the failure of critique—after all that work, it turns out critique couldn't even protect the site of its own emergence'.[240] 'What's more,' he adds, is that 'it was precisely the turning inward of Theory toward itself, the rise of academic jargon and the separation of the field of professional reading from amateur practice, that made the literary academy increasingly self-absorbed and thus increasingly irrelevant, not only inside the university but to the society at large'.[241] Perhaps this is why I feel such a disconnect between what we do In Here and what goes on Out There.

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[235] Fuss, p. 353.
[236] Fuss, p. 353.
[237] Fuss, p. 353.
[238] Hayot, p. 283.
[239] Robbins, p. 374.
[240] Hayot, p. 291.
[241] Hayot, p. 291.

What do we want literary criticism to do, and for whom? For a long time I have been inspired by postcritique's ambitions to turn outward, to bridge the gap between academia and the public, and to effect change in both worlds through being in better conversation with each other. Its recognition of the roles that subjectivity, rather than objectivity, and personal experience, rather than any pretense to detachment, play in how we interpret what we read, and more broadly how we interpret and interact with the world around us, seems pragmatic. At the very least it doesn't seem like a bad thing to include in our literary criticism. Its project is ambitious, sure. But then so was critique, and that got us somewhere. I remain, as I wrote earlier, less convinced that literary criticism can change lives. but I do believe it can change minds. Which may, after all, be the same kind of thing.

Authority and Academia (II)

Dear Mary Karr:

In 2018 I had to confront the fact that I was a woman. Up until then, I'd been disinterested and privileged enough to have never really had to care about feminism, except in the abstract, what seems like common sense, 'I agree men and women should be treated equal' sort of way (you know, without actually doing very much to work towards this for anyone but myself). When you tweeted in May, and the internet got loud with anti-David-Foster-Wallace sentiment, I am embarrassed to admit to you that I wasn't bothered. Being a woman and a writer, and being a scholar and a fan of Wallace, you could reasonably expect me to have *some* response, but I thought: other feminists will deal with this for me.

But over time, the convergence of a few things made me rethink my initial indifference. The #MeToo movement continued apace, which was hopeful even as it was depressing. I happened to be reading a lot of wonderful and challenging women writers for a creative non-fiction workshop I was auditing at the University of Texas, Austin, which was good. I also happened to be reading what felt like a lot of online articles that described Wallace fans as literary chauvinists, the natural extension of liking an author who'd been described as a misogynist—not so good. I attended the 2018 David Foster Wallace conference in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, where #MeToo signs were posted in the corridors of Stevenson Hall at Illinois State University, and Wallace's problematic status was a topic of both casual conversation and the keynote address—this was uncomfortable. I was also finding myself newly and discomfortingly jaded about academia and had been giving quite a bit of thought to what the hell did I think I was 'doing' as a literary studies scholar—disconcerting, to say the least.

I thought about all these things separately and at length, only dimly aware that they were probably somehow interconnected, even peripherally, and contributing to my general state of confusion. Whenever I feel guilty about something, it's usually an indicator that I need to take a closer look at it. And no matter how much I told myself that my interest in Wallace was not a feminist issue (or at least that I needn't make it one) I couldn't shake this feeling that I'd dropped the ball.

I read your book, *The Art of Memoir*, while writing my thesis. I highlighted a part where you wrote: 'as a strange child reading the sagas of Helen Keller and Maya Angelou, I just felt less lonely. In some animistic way, I believed they were talking . . . "only to me."'[242] For me, and for so long, the writer who made me feel less lonely, who I felt was talking only to me, was David Foster Wallace.

Cheers,
Grace

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[242] Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir*, First edition. edn (New York: Harper, 2015).

Dear Rita Felski:

One of the criticisms levelled at postcritique, as you well know, is that it is 'inherently conservative or anti-intellectual'.[243] This is because critique prides itself on being critical, political and progressive, and so any ambivalence about its usefulness is seen as being uncritical, and open to charges of 'political quietism, active complicity, or worse'.[244] You and other postcritical scholars have repeatedly explained that the 'political and institutional bearings of postcritique' are not at odds with 'progressive commitments,' nor are they at odds with critique.[245] You wrote that just because 'individuals do not engage in 'critique' does not mean they must be uncritical'. [246]

I agree, but I will say that the desire to be apolitical is something I have to watch in myself. I feel the lure of the apolitical, of the uncritical; it is a siren calling to me from a very isolated rock in the middle of a vast ocean, far from social media, news both fake and real, all politics, other people's opinions, their activism, their judgement, far from having to make judgements of my own. On that rock, I get to only think about what directly affects me: do I have eggs in the fridge? Has my pay gone into my bank account? When will I finish this thesis? Is my papa dying or will he spend the next five years in that nursing home wishing he were dead? Will I let myself eat some almonds this afternoon?

I can talk endlessly about the things I love and about my own experiences and how they affect me, but I don't want to talk about the things that make me uncomfortable. I don't know how to engage (how to engage *well*) with the things that make me uncomfortable, like the Black Lives Matter protests happening in Australia and around the world, like global warming, like everything that seems urgent and important but that I have no idea even where to start with it all because there is just too much to start with. As I write this to you, in July 2020, it is very easy for me to wonder what the point *is* of what I'm doing, here, in this essay, in my research, etc. There are simply more important things that I could attend to. Literary criticism will not save the world. The world is on fire.

I don't know what to do about this, yet. And the reality is that I still have to submit this thesis if I want to get the degree I've spent five years working towards, so my thesis is what I am going to do and I will try and do it well. There are days when I do fully believe that it's impossible to worry about all the world, that humans, pre-globalization, never had to, never were meant to, and that if we can each just tend to our little spot on the globe, and do our jobs well, then there'll be some cumulative positive effect—we will have chipped in to our global community in small but significant ways. And then there are days, most days, lately, where that seems like some self-serving naïve privileged bullshit and that I need to be doing more. I think both things are true at once, and that this is why it feels difficult to be alive and engaged a lot of the time.

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[243] Felski and Anker, p. 2.
[244] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 87.
[245] Felski and Anker, p. 2.
[246] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 138.

But the truth is that I heard the siren's apolitical call way before I turned to postcritique. And if anything, postcritique forced me to be more politically engaged than I wanted to be. I didn't, for example, engage with #MeToo until I'd decided I wanted defend my attachment to a problematic author (I'm not, like, super proud that this is the reason I became more politically engaged, but it is what it is). This is not about saving the world. But in the limited, though not insignificant, ways that literary criticism can contribute to a better world, I think postcritique, as you describe it, offers something that we've heretofore rejected based on it being, apparently, the opposite of everything critique stands for. If I'm being charitable, I'd say that I didn't know how to engage well with charged and complex and political issues—very specifically, #MeToo and David Foster Wallace being my 'problematic fave'—using critique. This isn't to say that critique isn't perfectly capable of engaging well with these sorts of issues, only that it's not how I think I best engage with them. I remember back in 2016 when I was reading a chapter of *Uses of Literature* for a topic I was tutoring in, and I bounced up and down in my seat with excitement because you wrote that there was 'no reason why our readings cannot blend analysis and attachment, criticism and love'.[247] I read this and felt hopeful. About what, at that time, I wasn't sure, but something about your work threw into relief how stagnant I'd been feeling, without even knowing it. Your writing was revelatory. It's how I felt when I read Toril Moi, Jane Tompkins, Eve Sedgwick, a whole lineage of scholars who inform what we understand to be postcritique today. But you were the first of them, for me. I, of course, went and read your other work. And when you asked, in *The Limits of Critique*, if perhaps it was 'time to start asking different questions' of our work—to ask: "But what about love?" Or: "Where is your theory of attachment?"[248] I'm sure I punched the air and exclaimed something like, 'YES, PRECISELY!'

The reason I wanted to write a thesis on Wallace in the first place is that I love his work, and I love him. Reading Wallace helped me recover from my eating disorder and anxiety (or at least 'manage,' since recovery seems to be less a matter of getting over something and more just learning better ways of managing). I worry, though, given the different, I guess more 'professional,' kind of anxieties I've internalised from critique and its suspicious disposition, that to approach Wallace and his writing from a place of love, especially in light of #MeToo and cancel culture, will come off exactly as the critics of postcritique argue it will; that is, it will come off as uncritical. (I mean, he gets called out for throwing a table at a woman and I'm sitting here, hand raised, like, 'yeah but *I* really like him'.) And still, for five years of my PhD, I have let my love of Wallace drive my research. But I suppressed its presence in my writing because I learned that a critic must be detached. This has always felt disingenuous to me. I am not the only PhD student who signed up for an at-least-four-if-not-more-years-of-your-life degree because it would give me those at-least-four-if-not-more-years to work on something I love, or at least feel intensely about.

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[247] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 22.
[248] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 10.

Postcritique is open-minded and capacious enough to let me make my love for Wallace an essential part of my work. But this approach *cannot* be uncritical, right? Not if I'm doing my job well, and not as of 2018, when to love Wallace is, in ways that I am still trying to come to grips with, to be considered (sort of, maybe, depends who you're talking with) as being complicit in his abusive behaviour. Finding the way to write 'postcritically' about this stuff has been hard. As you say, 'our language of critique is far more sophisticated and substantial than our language of justification'.[249] I find it significantly easier to talk about why Wallace is a problematic guy—it is way harder to justify why I love him and his work (especially when the value of his work is, it seems, tied to his overall goodness as a person). I know well enough how to articulate the former in a way that you may find persuasive, using critique to stay detached, to be on guard, to be against a status quo that protects white men in power. My experience of reading Wallace and my justification for continuing to do so despite him being problematic, however, is so subjective and personal that it's an argument that in some ways can only be taken on faith. But here's what you've taught me about critique: 'There is, in short, nothing automatically progressive about a stance of suspicion—nor is such a stance inherently marginal, oppositional, or even unusual'.[250] Toril Moi says that '[t]he only thing the hermeneutics of suspicion makes us do is read texts in a spirit of suspicion. While that spirit may sometimes be justified, it is not always helpful, or even interesting'.[251] I feel this has broader application.

You wrote that 'at a certain point, critique does not get us any further,'[252] and I have wondered about this, in relation to Wallace and his 'problematic' status. We can critique his work and interrogate his problematic representations (e.g. of gender, race and sexuality) within that work, but I'm not sure this can accommodate all the conversations we might have about Wallace. Moi says 'we must learn to recognize situations in which suspicion is not called for, situations requiring us to speak up for the things we care about. Sometimes skepticism and suspicion will simply be less politically useful than admiration, care, love'.[253] I think skepticism and suspicion are politically useful in the situation of Wallace and #MeToo, of course they are. But I also think these things only get us so far.

Cheers,
Grace

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[249] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 22.
[250] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 45.
[251] Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 5.
[252] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 9.
[253] Moi, '"Nothing Is Hidden" from Confusion to Clarity; or, Wittgenstein on Critique', p. 32.

Dear Ursula K. Le Guin:

When I was in my early twenties, my favourite commencement address (possibly the only one I'd ever heard, but it was a banger) was the one David Foster Wallace gave in 2005 at Kenyon College, later published as *This is Water*. I can't remember how I stumbled upon your 1986 Bryn Mawr commencement address, but I can tell you it blew my mind. When you talked about the difference between the father and the mother tongue, and how when we go to university we're trained to speak using the father tongue, to the exclusion of the mother tongue, you crystallised something for me, a sense of something lost or neglected that I hadn't even known was lost because I just assumed scholarship had to be written in a particular way using a particular language. Which it kind of did, if you wanted to be read/heard.

The father tongue, you wrote, is 'the language of thought that seeks objectivity'.[254] And it is 'the language of power'. [255] It is the language that we use to critique something. It is the language of authority. Most of us understand that the way to be accepted into a group is to learn their language and speak it, learn their way of doing things and do it. We know this intuitively and we learn by watching it happen. But I have also, over time, learned that to be included somewhere means, necessarily, that something, elsewhere, is excluded. You helped me understand that the language we use in our scholarship communicates a particular set of values or aesthetic principles, that valorise, while also masking, the masculinity (by which I mean the rhetorical and affective style that we've learned to associate with masculinity, like rationality, detachment, objectivity, and one-upmanship), negativity, and exclusion built into this language. You said that what we exclude from our academic language is the mother tongue. What we devalue is the personal, the subjective, the emotional—this language is for private use only.

Have you read Jane Tompkins's article, 'Me and My Shadow'? I think you'd be sympathetic to her argument. 'The public-private dichotomy,' she writes, 'which is to say the public-private hierarchy, is a founding condition of female oppression'.[256] Professionalism, reason, rationality, objectivity—these are all persuasive and historically effective excuses for why the father tongue is most appropriate in matters of public importance. These same excuses mask the implicit bias against the mother tongue in these public spaces, one example being the academy. Though both men and women are done a disservice by not being encouraged to use the mother tongue in academia, women are slighted twice over since their gender is so tied to this devalued language. 'Because women in our culture are not simply encouraged but *required* to be the bearers of emotion, which men are culturally

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[254] Ursula K. Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, (Newburyport: Grove Atlantic, 2017), p. 148.
[255] Le Guin, p. 147.
[256] Jane Tompkins, 'Me and My Shadow', *New Literary History,* 19 (1987), 169.

conditioned to repress,' Tompkins argues that 'an epistemology which excludes emotions from the process of attaining knowledge radically undercuts women's epistemic authority'. [257]

Tompkins begins her article describing the two voices inside her, and how they each feel about 'Ellen's essay' (an essay on feminist criticism to which Tompkins is responding in this article). 'One is the voice of a critic who wants to correct a mistake in the essay's view of epistemology. The other,' Tompkins writes, 'is the voice of a person who wants to write about her feelings'.[258] This person feels that the kind of critical response she intends to make to Ellen's essay is wrong, and 'beside the point, because a critique of the kind the critic has in mind only insulates academic discourse further from the issues that make feminism matter'.[259] The critic, however, 'believes such feelings, and the attitudes that inform them, are softminded, self-indulgent, and unprofessional'.[260] Tompkins doesn't know how to mediate between these two voices, or how to write her response 'without leaving everything else behind—the birds outside my window, my grief over Janice, just myself as a person sitting here in stocking feet, a little bit chilly because the windows are open, and thinking about going to the bathroom. But not going yet'.[261] Over the course of her article, Tompkins describes a flash of insight that allowed her to recognise that 'the conventions defining legitimate sources of knowledge overlapped with the conventions defining appropriate (male) gender behavior'.[262] She writes: 'I saw that I had been socialized from birth to feel and act in ways that automatically excluded me from participating in the culture's most valued activities. No wonder I felt so uncomfortable in the postures academic prose forced me to assume; it was like wearing men's jeans'.[263] She concludes: 'I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That's all there is to it'.[264]

Isn't that rad? I feel like her article and your commencement speech gave me this wonderful permission to speak personally in my scholarship. I think that this father/mother tongue binary is now probably a bit dated (which is a good thing!) but it's not totally anachronistic and, late to the game as I am, your talk has been instructive. Moreover, it led me to a whole tradition of feminist writers that have also blown my mind. I feel like I'm playing catch up and I'm loving every minute of it.

Cheers,

Grace

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[257] Tompkins, p. 170.
[258] Tompkins, p. 169.
[259] Tompkins, p. 169.
[260] Tompkins, p. 169.
[261] Tompkins, p. 173.
[262] Tompkins, p. 170.
[263] Tompkins, p. 170.
[264] Tompkins, p. 169.

Dear Deirdre Coyle:

Lately I've been noticing more and more the (often subtle and therefore even more maddening) ways in which women are not heard by men, not talked to but at, or over. And it pisses me off. Something that feels even worse than being dismissed is having your presence acknowledged and being dismissed anyway. In hindsight, I am disappointed with how your article, 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me,' was received within our community—and especially I was disappointed to read prominent Wallace scholar, Marshall Boswell, give the following assessment of a variety of responses (yours included) from women who resist reading Wallace. In case you haven't had the occasion to read it, I include it here:

> An internet literary genre is being born. Call it Wallace Snark. Although there are numerous variations on the form, the genre, generally speaking, consists of literary blogs by women complaining about their boyfriends and, by extension, David Foster Wallace . . . [T]he implication [of these essays] is the same: boys who ask their girlfriends to read David Foster Wallace are controlling jerks . . . Another unavoidable takeaway from these essays . . . is that the authors by and large have not actually read *Infinite Jest* . . . This failure—or as we shall see, pointed refusal—to address the book itself is also one of the key features of the genre, and of the complaint. The lit-bros urging their lovers to read Wallace are guilty for the mere act of recommending the book in the first place. The recommendation represents an affront, if not a sexist act of aggression. Refusal to read the book has become an act of resistance . . . That resistance has also occasioned a number of baroque and recondite variations on the Wallace/Lit-Bro genre . . . This is all very cute but hardly edifying.[265]

This is all very cute but hardly edifying—blech. I'll admit, when I first read your article, I wasn't paying attention to what you were trying to tell your reader. I thought your opening hook (I'd decided it was only a hook) about the guy who liked Wallace also being the guy who forced you to do cocaine during sex, was horrifically punchy. But I also felt strongly that your bad experience should have no bearing on the quality of Wallace's work, nor should it be used to stereotype his fans. Even though I wasn't a man recommending Wallace, the idea that you didn't like Wallace because you didn't like his fans—it stung. How I consoled myself was to respond to you (in my head, obvs) by dismissing you. I thought to myself: this article is too *subjective*, too *personal*, too *feelings-based* to be a reasonable argument against reading Wallace. It's *anti-intellectual*. And it's only with the benefit of hindsight that I can see you fully expected this kind of response. When you begin your discussion of Wallace's short story collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, you declare: 'I'm going to do one of the many things which, as a non-male writer, feels terrible, and I'm going to talk about my

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[265] Marshall Boswell, *The Wallace Effect: David Foster Wallace and the Contemporary Literary Imagination*, (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 125-27.

feelings'.[266] And then you talk about how bad it feels to read a book about misogyny written by a straight cis man (which I think is fair, btw, although I don't think that means Wallace produced a bad book, or that he shouldn't have written it in the first place).

In his response to your article, and to all the 'literary blogs by women', Boswell just proves your point about men who recommend (or in this case, defend) Wallace. This is embarrassing for me as a Wallace fan and scholar. Boswell dismisses your perspective because it isn't scholarly, while still considering it worth including and rebutting in his book, which feels dismissive in a very extra way. In this context, I don't think it matters if your article is scholarly or not—what matters is its relevance. I don't agree with everything you've written in this article, but your experience can't be divorced from the larger conversation about the perceived misogyny of Wallace and his fans, a conversation that *is* being had in Wallace studies. And it feels like we scholars miss something when our response to you is to reinscribe unhelpful, sexist, and elitist boundaries—e.g. emotional/detached, woman/man, subjective/objective, popular critique/academic critique—that shut down conversations that might challenge these binaries and actually be generative. It feels like we miss something when it comes to understanding the bigger entity that is David Foster Wallace. And there is something about #MeToo and its valuation of women's experiences that seems consequential to how this conversation about Wallace unfolds. On top of that, I can't defend my love of Wallace, my experience of reading his work, my continued investment in him as a scholar and a fan, without acknowledging your experience, too. This should be a level playing field.

Cheers,
Grace

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[266] Deirdre Coyle, 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me', *Electric Literature,* (2017) <https://electricliterature.com/men-recommend-david-foster-wallace-to-me> [accessed 21 August 2019].

Dear Roxane Gay:

The first experience I had of your work was in reading your essay: 'How to Be Friends with Another Woman'. I was auditing a graduate course in creative non-fiction at the University of Texas, Austin, and each week one of us in the class would choose our set readings. The class was made up of eleven women and one man—I read a lot of women writers that Fall semester (for my week's reading I set an essay by David Foster Wallace, which forced me to confront how few non-male, non-white, non-English-speaking authors I read, or was even aware of—Wallace was the outer limit of my literary world). Your essay on how to be friends with another woman was deeply uncomfortable to read.

You wrote the essay as a list. Number 3 on that list was directed at women who proudly claim to be 'mostly friends with guys'.[267] I wouldn't say I proclaimed this about myself, but I nursed a secret satisfaction that I was mostly friends with guys, especially as someone who was involved in the Wallace community. In fact, there was a very real part of me that felt lucky I liked Wallace as much as I did; liking Wallace was the key to a kingdom, a kingdom in which, as a woman, I felt kind of like a novelty (my delusions of grandeur were grand indeed, and, as I vocalise them here, mortifying). I did have plenty of female friends at that time, but women who were not yet my friends were my competitors; they intimidated me, I admired them. I competed with women but I wanted to be liked by men—I felt zero competition with the one guy in our class, and I predictably entertained ideas about whether or not I was attracted to him and whether we might date if he was impressed by my writing (that did not happen). I didn't become, like, forever friends with any of the people in that graduate writing workshop, although I follow some of them on Instagram, but I can point to that overall experience as being a turning point in my education, inside and outside of academia. It was because of that class that I read Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, and it's because of Maggie Nelson that I ended up writing a conference paper for that year's Wallace conference that ended up becoming the frame for an entirely new thesis project. Women writers are so cool! I know this isn't news to you but OH MY GOD.

But this letter isn't to Maggie Nelson, it's to you. After reading 'How to Be Friends with Another Woman' I thought: here's a very strong writer and I don't want to read any more of her work right now because I suspect it will make me feel very uncomfortable and guilty and like a bad feminist (the implication, I thought, was built into the essay collection's title). I made a mental note to come back to you when I was ready, and one day I was. Obviously, though, I am an idiot for not returning to *Bad Feminist* sooner.

In 'Bad Feminist: Take One' you write that your favourite definition of 'feminist' is one that Su, an Australian woman (represent!), gave when interviewed for a 1996 anthology called *DIY*

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[267] Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist*, (London: Constable & Robinson, 2014), pp. 47-48.

Feminism. Su said that feminists are 'just women who don't want to be treated like shit'.[268] You wrote that you liked this definition for its concision and pointedness, but that you still feel that you 'fall short as a feminist,' that you are 'not as committed as [you] need to be, that [you are] not living up to feminist ideals because of who and how [you] choose to be'.[269] You wrote that you 'feel this tension constantly,' this idea that 'there is a right way to be a woman'.[270] This was very comforting to read.

I have written five letters to other writers who are also women. I have talked to them about how I feel guilty for not engaging with feminism, for not being overtly political, for shutting down my feelings when I write scholarship, and for doing this because I *know* how women who write about their feelings are seen by people who think there is a time and a place for that stuff and it's definitely not that time or place when it makes them feel awkward AF. I have talked to them about how it feels to be a fan of Wallace but to be reluctant about being openly a fan, both because that would involve bringing my fannish feelings into my scholarship and also, more awkwardly, because I am a fan of a man who is problematic. The things I haven't said in my letters: I put too much emphasis on my body and how I look, I notice myself not having opinions around men except to say I like the things that they like, I wear makeup to go to the supermarket, I feel I need to thank my boyfriend when he does the dishes or helps me unload the dishwasher (as if he's helping me do what's 'my job' rather than a shared duty) but expect no thanks in return when I do housework, I shave my legs and would feel weird about wearing a dress out if I hadn't, I don't say anything when women I'm with talk trash about the physical appearance of other women ('she's put on weight,' 'she's had work done,' blah blah blah), I tend to get jealous of women I think are cool and this makes me possessive of the men in my life because I feel threatened by these cool women, I am polite and submissive and not in like a 'it's nice to be nice' way but in a 'please don't think I'm just another irrational, emotional woman' way. I'm terrified of 'nagging'. I feel like I fall short as a feminist; I know I do. It stresses me out. I should be doing better for women who haven't had it as easy as me.

And yet, the idea of being a feminist stresses me out. Well, the idea I have of what being a feminist would mean/look like stresses me out. You say yourself that you 'sometimes cringe when [you] are referred to as a feminist' ('[t]he label,' you write, 'is rarely offered in kindness').[271] The label and the cringe are derived from the kind of feminist caricature that makes me want to disavow feminism because I don't want to be seen as 'an angry, sex-hating, man-hating victim lady person'.[272] This caricature is itself derived from a kind of 'essential feminism,' that seems to rely on 'anger, humorlessness, militancy, unwavering principles, and a prescribed set of rules for how to be a proper feminist woman, or at least a proper white, heterosexual feminist woman,'[273] which, point taken on

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[268] Gay, p. 303.
[269] Gay, p. 303.
[270] Gay, pp. 303-04.
[271] Gay, p. 305.
[272] Gay, p. xi.
[273] Gay, p. 304.

that last part. Like you, I know better than to reduce feminism to this stereotype, at least intellectually I do. But it is this sense of militancy, the idea that there is a correct way to do feminism, that has kept me from actively engaging with it. Your essays, however, are welcoming, even though I am a white, heterosexual feminist woman who regrets that feminism hasn't welcomed you in the same way.

You 'openly embrace the label of bad feminist'.[274] You do so, you write, 'because [you are] flawed and human . . . not terribly well versed in feminist history . . . not as well read in key feminist texts as [you] would like to be. [You] have certain . . . interests and personality traits and opinions that may not fall in line with mainstream feminism, but [you are] still a feminist'.[275] Hard same. You say that you 'hear many young women say they can't find well-known feminists with whom they identify,' and that, disheartening as this is, '[w]hen you can't find someone to follow, you have to find a way to lead by example'.[276] Thank you for leading me by your example.

You begin your essay collection by saying that feminism has helped you find your voice and has helped you believe that your voice matters. You say feminism has given you peace.[277] You write that when you remember how you 'once disavowed feminism' you are 'ashamed of [your] ignorance,'[278] and I believe I will feel this way for a long time, too. A few years ago, I came across this thing called postcritique (long story, don't even worry about it) and I thought it was revolutionary. I'd never come across these sorts of ideas in literary criticism before. Even without sure footing in the critique that came before it ('nother long story, don't even worry about it—heck, you're an academic, you probably know it already), I disavowed critique and decided postcritique would be my guiding star. Postcritique valued my voice, my experience, my feelings. It made writing so much easier when I could be upfront about this stuff, rather than pretending to be detached and objective. Postcritique was going to help me write about Wallace and #MeToo and problematic faves—my supervisors kept asking me why I was reluctant to engage in feminist critique of Wallace and I just thought, 'I am beyond that'.

But as I read further, I noticed that so much of what made postcritique appealing and possible was due to ground-clearing efforts by feminists. It will probably come as no surprise to you (although it was news to me) that '[f]eminist theorists have long urged researchers to recognise and articulate their own (critical and/or affective) investments in their research,'[279] and they 'were among the first critics to emphasize the affective dimensions of interpretation, to talk about reading as an embodied practice, to conceive of literature as a means of creative self-fashioning'.[280] Feminist writing that I was reluctant to engage with has in fact been one of my greatest sources of instruction. Feminist

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[274] Gay, p. x.
[275] Gay, p. xi.
[276] Gay, pp. xiii-xiv.
[277] Gay, p. xiii.
[278] Gay, p. xii.
[279] Stephanie Patrick, 'Becky with the Twitter: Lemonade, Social Media, and Embodied Academic Fandom', *Celebrity Studies,* 10 (2019), 4.
[280] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp. 29-30.

studies (and ethnic, critical race, minority, cultural studies, etc.) understand that form is as important as content; how we say what we say is as important as what we say. Their '[a]ttention to voice (who speaks and for whom they speak), mode (how was agency acknowledged in the active mode or hidden behind the passive), and genre (which forms had been valued and which devalued) called attention to the gendered, racialized, and class biases implicit in what had previously been understood as merely a matter of aesthetic principles'.[281] I cannot disavow critique because without critique I wouldn't have feminism. I cannot disavow feminism because without feminism I wouldn't have found my voice as a scholar and a writer. It's just all so wonderfully entangled, isn't it.

Cheers,
Grace

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[281] Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, 'Introduction', in *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions,* ed. by Angelika Bammer and Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015), pp. 6-7).

Dear Leslie Jamison:

Your memoir, *The Recovering*, was recommended to me by Bill, a friend and fellow fan of David Foster Wallace (btw, I am gobsmacked and envious, but not surprised, that not only do you have a pull quote from Chris Kraus on the front cover of this book but that your book, in Kraus's words, changed her life!). Bill described *The Recovering* as a 500+ page book that was a combination of your dissertation research on recovery narratives and the history of famous alcoholic writers and your own experiences of recovery from alcoholism and an eating disorder—*and* on top of that, you were a fan (is that fair to say?) of David Foster Wallace. I mean, it sounded like something I would devour. And I did. My copy of your book is dog-eared all over. It's fair to say I'm a fan.

I don't know what to call identifying with someone who identified with the same things you identified with in a book (I guess it's just called common ground, or attunement, or affinity, or something?) but I wanted to say, in a breathless fangirl sort of way, that I feel the way about Wallace the way you feel about Wallace. You wrote: 'I read *Infinite Jest* like a desperate old man running his metal detector over the sand, waiting for every ding that signified buried wisdom'.[282] You said you 'felt indicted by critics like Christian Lorentzen, who wrote disdainfully of "readers who look to novels and novelists for instruction on how to lead their lives," who were drawn to Wallace's "bromides about brains beating like hearts, literature as a salve for loneliness, and novels comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, etc."'[283] But when I read Wallace, I was 'bromide-dependent,' just as you said you were.[284] Reading about how you 'read Wallace with [your] psychic highlighter always at the ready'[285] (what an awesome phrase) gave me, as Rita Felski would say, a flash of recognition.[286] I guess what I'm trying to say is that it's very cool to read a writer and feel unalone/understood/seen/etc., and it's a whole other layer of cool to read a writer and feel unalone/understood/seen/etc., *because* that writer responded the same way to something you also read. Does that make sense?

Anyway, knowing that that was your response to IJ was a great comfort. I've met many people who've had similar experiences of reading IJ—that book has helped loads of people with their recovery from various things—but, and I hope you don't feel I'm being reductive of the scope of your work or reducing you to your own mental health stuff when I say, there was something of especial comfort knowing you'd also had an eating disorder. Even though alcoholism is at the fore of your memoir and the eating disorder stuff is more marginal, the similarities between the two are not lost on me. I feel at home in the Wallace community but it's also true that there are a lot of men there, and although we share common ground with our experiences of reading Wallace, eating disorders

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[282] Leslie Jamison, *The Recovering*, (London: Granta Books, 2018), p. 362.
[283] Jamison, p. 362.
[284] Jamison, p. 362.
[285] Jamison, p. 362.
[286] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 23.

predominantly affect women, and I dunno, something about this makes me feel particularly grateful to you for sharing your story. Like I said, I'm a fan.

It wasn't really until 2018 that I realised I was a fan of David Foster Wallace. This shouldn't have been quite the revelation it was. I'd adored his work since 2012. And still, I had never considered myself a 'fan'. It wasn't a comfortable realisation, because at that point Wallace fans—at least, the stereotype of Wallace fans, which tends to be some iteration of a white man with a beard wearing flannel who likes to tell you why you should read and love David Foster Wallace (the shorthand for this is, as you're probably aware, 'lit bro,' with all the mansplaining chauvinism that term implies)—weren't thought of particularly kindly. Of course, nothing changed, really, when I started using the word to describe myself in relation to Wallace, but acknowledging it as an accurate description meant I had to think about what the connotations of being a fan were.

As is often the case with stereotypes, they only approximate reality and usually not that accurately; my experience of being a fan and part of the Wallace community was totally divorced from the Wallace fan that stalked online editorials. The Wallace community is a curious blend of scholars and fans (or some combo of both), and the way that scholars and fans engage with each other in this community is something I've always found heartening and inclusive and particularly precious about this group of people. As a PhD student, I was fortunate to experience this kind of warm welcome into academia. It is also something that, later in my degree, made me feel like Rita Felski's conception of postcritique was especially sympathetic or attuned to our community. In *Uses of Literature*, Felski writes about the schism between academic and non-academic readers. Part of Felski's project is driven by the desire to bridge this gap by engaging seriously with 'ordinary motives for reading . . . that are either overlooked or undervalued in literary scholarship'.[287] She isn't defending 'folk reading over scholarly interpretation'; what she argues is that a 'respect for everyday perceptions is entirely compatible with a commitment to theory; such perceptions give us questions to pursue'.[288] I felt that the Wallace community had already bridged this gap quite well, and was proud of the community for that, but then Wallace became problematic and so did his fans, and our community, I felt, needed maybe not defending (although I'm predisposed to do that) but, like, I felt they needed to be made visible, perhaps is the word, in the conversations that were happening about Wallace and the stereotype of his fans. So I guess I thought that I could re-jig Felski's approach to engage not only with Wallace's readers but, more specifically, with his fans and with this broader question of how we do or do not reconcile ourselves with our problematic faves. I didn't know how to do this honestly without acknowledging my involvement in the community and my love for Wallace.

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[287] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 14.
[288] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, pp. 14-15.

Being a writer, an academic, and a fan (if that's fair to say), I wonder if, whenever you wrote about Wallace—specifically those parts that might have appeared in your dissertation on recovery narratives—you felt the implicit pressure to suppress the parts of yourself that wanted to talk about how and why you attached to his work. I suppressed these parts of me without question for four years of my PhD. I'd learned throughout my entire undergrad, and high school, that I was to write objectively, to avoid the presence of the 'I' wherever possible (leading to some unnecessarily convoluted sentences beginning with 'This paper will . . .'). It's not that this is wrong (there's certainly a place for it in scholarship) or that it felt wrong (it felt utterly normal) but that I didn't really have a lot of fun when I wrote, and it always felt like I was being disingenuous, in a way. Felski's work on postcritique encouraged me to contemplate what it would mean for my writing to be less self-effacing and more upfront about the way my personal likes and dislikes, etc., were influencing what and how I wrote. I never chose to be 'against' critique at any point—postcritique just happened to be in the right place at the right time for me, I guess.

Bruce Robbins defends critique, in part, by writing about how it 'distinguishes us as academics from fans as well as from most reviewers, belletrists, and other adjuncts to the publishing industry'.[289] He suggests that Felski's project might lead us to 'a criticism that is closer to fandom, a profession that is closer to the industry's dollars-and-cents metric and its rhetoric of helpful and largely positive advice to the would-be consumer'.[290] Robbins's argument doubles down on all the criticisms that Felski predicts she will receive with her postcritical project; it is uncritical, apolitical, contributing to the corporatisation of higher education. But what about this idea of a criticism that is closer to fandom?

There is already a word for this kind of critic: 'acafan'. Fan (/media/cultural) studies were engaging this idea of criticism-meets-fandom in the early 90s. Henry Jenkins is credited (or blamed, depending on your viewpoint) with the term acafan. Even though the term did not appear in *Textual Poachers* (1992), he began his seminal study of fandom by outing himself in his introduction as a fan.[291] From here, the idea of the acafan emerged and became common usage, as a way to de-pathologise fandom. Existing scholarship, at that time, tended to depict fans as deluded, uncritical and 'inarticulate, incapable of explaining their motives or actions. This claim of inarticulateness was typically coupled by the scholar's refusal to engage with the community'.[292] This lack of engagement enabled the pathologisation of fandom because researchers 'were not implicated in their own analysis and were not accountable to a fan community'.[293] The emerging 'acafen' (fen is the plural of fan in science fiction culture) 'sought to distinguish themselves from the previous generation by signaling

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[289] Robbins, p. 372.
[290] Robbins, p. 372.
[291] Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 4.
[292] Henry Jenkins, 'The Origins of "Acafan"', (2011).
[293] Jenkins, 'The Origins of "Acafan"'.

their own affiliations with and accountability to the communities they were studying'.[294] From the vantage point of 2006, Jenkins wrote that there is a generation of aca-fen 'that is, people who are both academics and fans, for whom those identities are not problematic to mix and combine, and who are able to write in a more open way about their experience of fandom without the "obligation of defensiveness," without the need to defend the community.'[295] Acafans are freer, Jenkins says, to talk about the contradictions within a fandom, the disputes within a fan community, and to raise awkward issues that might have previously been glossed over.[296] And I suppose this is something I want to do when I write about Wallace and his fans, in light of his (and arguably our) problematic status.

Sometimes I wonder if I've tried to shift my understanding and practice of literary criticism too far, too much towards cultural and fan studies to the point where I may as well have signed up to a different discipline. But then I remember my discipline is also creative writing, which offers far more flexibility in terms of what I write and how, for which I am thankful—as I am thankful to writers like you who blend criticism with the personal, the subjective, the emotional. Regardless, I do want to insist that reader's experiences and interpretations of Wallace's work connect to his place in culture (this is true of all authors, right?), and so it should matter to literary criticism, even if takes a less traditional form as far as analysis goes. Talk to fans and you learn about why they attach to the work. Why they attach to the work affects how they do or don't disavow Wallace, now that he's our problematic fave. These things are connected, and I'm interested in finding the link between how we feel about what we read/consume and how we behave in real life. An ideological critique of Wallace's work might be instructive and useful in its own specific field of influence—it certainly performs a valuable function—but it won't account for why I have an A2 poster of Wallace in my office, you know?

Cheers,
Grace

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[294] Jenkins, 'The Origins of "Acafan"'.
[295] Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, p. 12.
[296] Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, p. 12.

How David Foster Wallace helped me with my eating disorder

In 2018 I broke my spine! It happened in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. I slipped down some carpeted stairs. From that moment forward I divested myself of both the fancy that I was as sure-footed as a mountain goat and a $300+ premium on any future travel insurance. It was a good day. My Airbnb host was glad that I wasn't intending to sue. I had a CT scan and got some fabulous pain relief for what turned out to be a fracture in my T5 vertebrae. The resident neurosurgeon assessed me. He told me I couldn't lift more than 10lbs and that I couldn't exercise for three to six months while the bone healed. I, being overwhelmed and alone in a hospital in America, cried. The neurosurgeon stood in the doorway and looked as if he was watching something very scary occur and told me, defensively, that he wasn't trying to make me cry. I said sorry and he said goodbye. I then carried my much heavier than 10lbs backpack to the bus stop and sat on my also-from-the-fall bruised butt on a plastic bus seat for the journey back to my Airbnb. What all this has to do with my love of David Foster Wallace should become clearer as this essay goes on.

I think the truth is that I've always been a perfectionist, very sensitive, and very self-critical. I've also always been very aware of this, about myself, but having that awareness hasn't made much difference, even in adult life. My essential response to everything when I was younger was 'I can do better'. This was especially during high school, at which time I was also a competitive swimmer. I became a competitive swimmer by default, before I'd developed the capacity to choose such a thing for myself. I was in the water at eighteen months old. I swam competitively until I was sixteen years old. At my peak, I trained six times a week for up to two hours, before school at 4:30AM, after school until 7:30PM, and on Saturdays. My sister and I, she was also a swimmer and more advanced than I would ever be, had competitions on the weekends. Former Australian competitive swimmer and ex-Olympian Kieren Perkins once said, of swimming: 'I spend six hours a day with my head in a bucket of water, looking at a black line.' This statement gestures towards the discipline needed for swimming, not to mention the ability to be with your head and only your head for six hours a day that swimming requires. I did my school homework at lunch, in the library. I slept in the pews during chapel. I always smelled of chlorine. I was good at swimming, not great. I often placed second, or worse. I never had the competitive appetite for the sport. The thing about great swimmers is they must devote themselves entirely to the sport or they won't make it professionally. Swimming will teach you how to have an all or nothing mindset. You will learn to be disciplined.

I had no problem with discipline back then, or now. I do, after all, have an eating disorder. I believe swimming was what you might call a 'vulnerability factor' that played into my later inability to not have an eating disorder. Which isn't to say swimming wasn't a good environment; there are many reasons why it was good for my development. It's mostly that I think, for someone like me, it was an environment that instructed me in specifically bad ways to think about my body, ways that, for someone like me, endured long after I quit the sport. Of course, at the time, I wasn't aware of any of

this. It's only with hindsight, like most things. For example, what I was aware of, at the time, was that once you quit swimming, you were likely to gain weight, and your weight was likely to be a subject of discussion among the swimmers who remained in training. I was not, however, aware that this is something I would remain aware of many years after I'd forgotten most of the detail about my swimming career. It might interest you to know that if you're a competitive swimmer you will regularly have your skinfolds tested. Skinfolds measure your body fat. Calipers pinch your skin together at specific spots all over your body and you get an overall result ranging from poor to excellent.

Serious physical training does a lot to a body. It can stunt, or at least slow down development. I developed late. I didn't get my first period until Year 11 of high school. I was still swimming at the time. All the ads told me that a period didn't need to stop me exercising. I learned to hide tampons behind the sanitary bin at the aquatic centre toilets so I could change my tampon mid-session. When I got out of the pool, my sister taught me to get to my towel quick and pat my legs dry to make sure no pale pink water ran down my thighs for anyone to notice. At the time it all felt like a big hassle, and when, several years down the track, I stopped getting my period, I was relieved. Of course, with hindsight, I should not have been relieved.

It might be interesting for you to know that swimming is a non-weight-bearing form of exercise, and also that weight-bearing exercise is how you increase bone density. And also that oestrogen is important for bone development. I did not know any of this back then.

One of my coaches liked to wax lyrical about mental toughness and how all the great swimmers had it if you watched them carefully. He praised me, once, for the strict focus I demonstrated before one of my long-distance races. This praise made me want to be even more strict and focussed. A swimmer's job is not just to win races but to achieve Personal Bests, or PBs, re: the time it takes you to finish your race. If you swim 50 metres in 30 seconds one month and 29 seconds the next, that's excellent. That's a PB. But all that means is next time you need to get 28 and ninety-nine hundredths of a second, or better. A plateau is eventually reached, but the general imperative is to just keep moving that goalpost. Keep losing time. Shrink those numbers. As is not uncommon among swimmers, I cried more than once when I didn't get a PB. In the cooldown pool I cried underwater. I was young, after all. You learn to swim, not how to emote something, anything, between the extremes of euphoria and devastation. And even though I'd once been praised for being mentally tough, I was a sensitive kid.

Eventually I quit. I knew I was good at swimming, not great. I might have been able to be better, but even if I cared enough to devote myself entirely to it, I still would never have been the best. And I didn't care in the end because I realised that though I loved the water I hated treading it all the time. But if you've been a swimmer for nearly all your life *you are a swimmer*. When you quit, you forgo, maybe even reject, that identity. And you need to find something to replace it, because for sixteen years that identity has been all or nothing.

I was not a good student. I was a great student. My grades were excellent—the higher the number the better. So at some point I decided, unconsciously, I think, to devote myself entirely to study instead. This was the beginning of Year 12, my final year at a private all-girls high school. Perhaps it goes without saying, I was a perfectionist student. My Tertiary Education Ranking (the 'grade' I'd use to get into university someday) was 98.95 out of a possible 99.95—that wasn't even the highest result in my graduating class. I mention this because numbers have been important to me, if that isn't already obvious.

I took a gap year in 2009. Five weeks across 35 countries in Europe on a bus with people in their late twenties who are there to forget they're at the age where they're meant to be 'adults'. I'd just turned 18. My dad, divorced from mum for seven years now, had moved to Paris at the end of 2008, and I organised to see him for one day when the tour stopped in the city. Of this day, I most remember sitting in the Champs de Mars garden, by the Eiffel Tower, asking him if he ever felt lonely and being told: no. We parted there, and I proceeded to go drink too much red and white wine. There were nights in Croatia, Bosnia and Paris where I don't remember how I got back to the hostel, and mornings where I woke up and realised, as I nursed a hangover, that I was lucky some things hadn't gone further than they had. I ate pan con jamón in Spain, pork knuckle with four different kinds of mustard in Prague, ćevapčići in Serbia, crêpes with banana and Nutella in Paris, goulash in Hungary, Florentine steak in Florence, souvlaki on Mykonos, waffles in Bruges, gelato in Italy, and a lot of Coco Pops and white toast for free breakfast at the hostel in London. I gained at least seven kilograms. Once I'd returned home and eventually lost the weight, my nana complimented me on this, saying that when I'd exited customs at Adelaide airport, it had been obvious to her that I'd enjoyed myself on my trip; I had. I remember sitting on the bus on the drive to another of the 35 countries, listening to my shuffle iPod, mouthing the words to Groove Armada's 'Superstylin'' and thinking: this is the happiest I have ever felt. In hindsight, it wasn't.

I was self-conscious about the weight I'd gained when I got home. I'd seek reassurance about this from mum, who eventually, since the reassurance she gave didn't stop me continuously seeking more of the same reassurance, suggested she and my sister and I, do some one-week Lorna Jane Active challenge. It was just one week of healthy eating and exercise. I weighed myself at the beginning. One night I was so hungry I cried, and mum gave me an extra bowl of cereal after dinner. By the end of the week I hadn't lost any weight. It was only one week, after all.

But then the weight started to disappear. A hundred grams here, a hundred grams there. Then it was kilograms. I weighed myself every day, thrilled when I saw the numbers going down. I started to weigh myself multiple times a day, but learned that as soon as I woke up, after going to the toilet, was when I would see the lowest number. When I reached my goal weight, I just kept going. I could do better. At the time, I was working at a vet clinic. It was at this clinic that my co-worker introduced me to coffee. I drank it black, over time increasing the number of teaspoons of instant coffee in one cup. From memory, it was four or five teaspoons I was eventually taking, because I needed the

energy. I didn't yet know, but I'm sure I appreciated on some unconscious level, that caffeine was an appetite suppressant. One day I didn't eat until dinner, and during my work shift I repeatedly weighed myself on the scales, there for the animals, to see if I could get the numbers to go down even further. I didn't tell anyone that I did this, but couldn't, at the time, have told you why I kept it secret. Shame was involved, but so was pride.

I guess, in hindsight, I knew for a long time that I had an issue with food and my body, but I ignored this about myself. I thought about food all the time. That's not hyperbole. All the time. I didn't recognise that I was obsessing, which makes sense since having an obsession precludes thinking about very much else, least of all doing the metacognitive work to realise that you have an obsession. I went to bed and fantasised about breakfast. After breakfast, I fantasised about lunch. After lunch, dinner. After dinner, breakfast. At some point when all this was going on, that vague block of time between 2009 and 2014, my period stopped coming. This is called amenorrhea. I incrementally started making my meals smaller. Maybe on some level I was aware that I was doing this, but most of it was on autopilot. Smaller meals made me more prone to anxiety and irritation. This is called functional hypoglycaemia. This anxiety made me want to restrict my eating even more because that made me feel in control where my emotions weren't. I was unpleasant to be around, and I knew how unpleasant I was, and it made me feel bad about myself, and so I made my meals smaller. And honestly it either didn't occur to me, or I chose to ignore, how this behaviour was feeding (lol) the problem.

In 2010, I didn't know what to do with my life so I started a degree in creative writing at Flinders University. Two years later, set as a reading for one of my topics, I encountered a short story: 'Good Old Neon,' by David Foster Wallace. I read the first sentence and I was totally disarmed. 'My whole life I've been a fraud'.[297] I read on. 'I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired. It's a little more complicated than that, maybe. But when you come right down to it it's to be liked, loved. Admired, approved of, applauded, whatever. You get the idea'.[298] And I did. My whole life up to that point was an exercise in achievement, which itself was an exercise in getting approval. University was no exception. I wanted to write the best short story for this creative writing topic and impress everyone in my writing workshop. And I wanted to do it with an air of humility and mystery that would make me interesting to these people. I spent every second of my day managing, so I thought, my self-presentation, so that even my introversion became less an instance of natural shyness and more a strategic decision that held me at a remove from my peers. I only spoke when I had something original (so I thought) and intelligent (so I thought) to contribute to class discussion. And all the while

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[297] David Foster Wallace, *Oblivion*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 2004), p. 141.
[298] Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 141.

I'd had a nagging but unarticulated suspicion that this made me a not-very-genuine person, even though I tried very hard indeed to be genuine.

Anyway, that's all adolescent stuff, and probably not that interesting or unique about me. The point is that when I read Wallace's story, I felt seen. The point is also that I saw myself in Neal, the narrator of the story (well, for the most part, until he kills himself). 'Good Old Neon' was so precious to me I couldn't bring myself to analyse it for class. When we eventually talked about it as a group, it turned out the guy who would eventually become my first boyfriend also felt the same way, although he made self-conscious fun of the experience. For my part, I took the whole thing very seriously. I fantasised that the author, whose interviews I later found online, must be a sensitive, troubled, totally special and insightful person, because of course I guess I thought of myself that way deep down. I imagined he and I would have a lot in common, if he'd gotten to know me. Which he couldn't, because he'd committed suicide four years earlier. This was the beginning of what became a, thus far, lifelong investigation into David Foster Wallace and his writing. Pronto, I ordered all his books online. Each day I checked the mail, and whenever a cardboard-packaged volume of his was dropped over the fence, it was like Christmas.

This was, it might be worth mentioning, around the same time I'd lost all my overseas weight. I was glad for this when it became apparent that it was also around the same time I would start dating a fellow writer. All of which is to say that even as I read Wallace and felt myself becoming more and more enlightened, not to mention visible to those around me, there was a part of me, well-hidden, that was getting darker and smarter. University is a time of great freedom, including around meals. I never ate with my writing group and this worked well for me.

That boyfriend bought me *The Pale King* for one of my birthdays, I forget which. He inscribed the front cover: '*The Pale King* was one of three finalists for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize. All three finalists were rejected. Wallace himself failed to finish writing this—he left it, neglected, and killed himself. So I've decided to leave the book to you. I hope you can learn to love it, and that it might come to mean something to you. I hope you can give it a home.' I didn't have to learn to love the book, I simply did. And as with 'Good Old Neon,' as with a lot of Wallace's work, I found myself in that book, and felt, yet again, and many times, totally disarmed. My relationship with Wallace lasted longer than the one with my boyfriend.

It was only when I was well into my PhD on Wallace, and, it must be said, still a fraud, or at least feeling like one, that I learned that what had happened in these moments of disarmament could be described as moments of recognition. I was reading Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature.* She asked: 'What does it mean to recognize oneself in a book?'[299] And continued: 'While turning a page I am arrested by a compelling description, a constellation of events, a conversation between characters, an interior monologue. Suddenly . . . a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader;

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[299] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 23.

an affinity or an attunement is brought to light'.[300] Felski said that when this happens, she feels herself 'addressed, summoned, called to account'; 'Indisputably, something has changed; my perspective has shifted; I see something that I did not see before'.[301] Yes! I exclaimed. That has been my experience! As with Wallace, this began my deep dive into Felski's work, the effects of which were only realised later in 2019 when I changed my thesis project entirely. My whole undergrad and Honours degrees had been spent telling my teacher what a text 'meant'—the equivalent of psychoanalysing a friend, or myself, which, I'll admit, is something I am prone to do—and here was an academic telling me the text might actually be fully cognizant of what it meant, and that perhaps it was I who needed to be told a thing or two.

Since I brought it up, I'll tell you now that my Honours degree was the absolute pits. It was when my, until that point ignored and suppressed, eating disorder reached its crescendo. This had something to do with the isolation of that year, coupled with my project being on Albert Camus and Wallace, and about if life had meaning and if suicide was a legitimate option in the face of the absurd, and topped off with a family trip to Turkey where tensions well and truly bubbled over in an Irish pub on the night Argentina was playing against some other country in one of the FIFA World Cup matches. On that trip I started eating only a peach for lunch. It was in the few months after that trip and before I submitted my thesis that I reached rock bottom and told mum that I didn't think I was doing very well as regards food and all that. She asked if I wanted to talk to someone and I said not yet. I didn't think I was unwell enough to be allowed to go to therapy, and I was also experiencing that relief from having offloaded a huge stress to someone that temporarily tricks you into thinking you have your shit under control when what you've only and really done is vent and created the headspace to going back to what you were doing. I have always found people who whine but never actually take proactive steps, however successful or not, to change their situation insufferable, which is why I guess I eventually did go to therapy so that at least I wouldn't hate myself more than I already clearly, if unconsciously, did.

If I had to pinpoint the moment where I understood, like, really recognised, that I had a problem with food, it would be the incident with the lemon curd cupcake. I had met a friend for coffee and the barista forgot our order. To apologise, the manager brought out a free lemon curd cupcake. I am yet to come up with a good way of describing anxiety. Mostly I just wanted to cry. My friend kept offering me the cupcake, insisting I have some, and I had to keep refusing him but couldn't explain why. Each time I refused I felt myself getting mad. Mad at my friend and mad at the manager and mad at myself for being mad at them and mad at myself for not being able to take a bite of a stupid dumb bright yellow cupcake. Eventually my friend gave up and ate it. I can still remember the smell

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[300] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 23.
[301] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 23.

of sugar and citrus. The rest of that day I felt totally pathetic that I'd been scared of a cupcake, and still relieved that I hadn't eaten any of it.

The thing I guess I would like to emphasise is that a lot of energy goes into refusing food and it's not like I enjoyed the whole experience. And stuff like that happened at regular intervals during the day because meals happen at regular intervals during the day. There were mornings where I stood in the kitchen paralysed, trying to decide if I could add a prune to my afternoon snack. I remember how in high school my friends once gossiped about our other friend who had anorexia nervosa, and how this friend had confided in one of the girls who was present in the group that day about how one time she, the anorexic friend, was in tears trying to decide if she could have a glass of Milo. And I, sitting there, did not say anything but in my head thought 'Wow, that's nuts.' What I really meant was that, at that time, this friend's torture over a glass of Milo was unfathomable to me. Years later, as I despaired over the prune, I recalled this conversation about the Milo and found the whole situation perfectly fathomable, and I would have liked to give my friend, who is now really only a Facebook friend, a hug. Imagine having that internal conflict over basically every meal.

Anyway, that's mostly how I remember 2014. Whatever part of my headspace that wasn't obsessing about food was obsessing about Wallace. I was unemployed at the time, I think. I know I spent many mid-mornings sitting in coffee shops reading Wallace's non-fiction essays. It was 'research' for my Honours thesis, but it was also just a way to not be at home alone, crying on the phone to mum at work and hearing her tell me that she was worried about me. Being out was also a way to kill time between meals, because being home and bored was a recipe for binge eating. I doubled down on the restriction when I stopped being bulimic. Forcing myself to throw up gave me way less satisfaction than refusing food. It was messier, and humiliating, and it felt wasteful. Not eating at all was cleaner, and therefore seemed more dignified. I learnt, reading Wallace's essay on Kafka, that the word 'anorexia' has its etymological roots in the ancient Greek word for 'longing'.[302] Bulimia comes from the Greek word meaning 'ox hunger,' which sounds wild and frenetic and out of control, but in my experience there's really more a robotic aspect to bulimia. In my experience it was a very quiet, automated process. For example: I would be watching TV and I would want a muffin. I'd go to the freezer—I made batches of muffins and froze them and this used to be a nice thing to do because, despite its connection to bingeing and purging, I did in fact find baking and other mechanical activities like that meditative and good for my anxiety, but anyway—I'd unwrap the muffin, microwave it, sit back in front of the TV and eat. But I was still hungry. Or I still wanted another muffin. So for ten or so minutes I would watch TV without watching it because I was thinking about muffins. And I think that even though I was going through the motions of going back and forth on it—I want it, it will make me feel bad, will I throw it up, how shall I compensate—at some point I'd just decide it would be a binge-purge afternoon. That's how it normally happens. I've already made

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[302] David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, (London: Abacus, 2007), p. 63.

up my mind even if I'm pretending to still think on it. As though what happens next is inevitable. So back to the freezer. Unwrap, defrost, eat. Repeat. Quietly, calmly, on autopilot. I kept doing that until I felt sick enough to make myself be sick. In the back of my mind I would think: 'At least now there are fewer muffins in the freezer to eat.' Knowing, of course, that all that really meant was I had to bake more to replace the ones I'd taken. And then, with the TV still on in the background, I would go to the toilet. I could leave the door open because obviously I was alone at home if I could eat all those muffins and not have to explain what I was doing to anyone else and so the noise or sight of me making myself vomit wasn't really an issue. I never really researched, you know, how to be bulimic. So I didn't know until later that you should drink lots to make the food come up easier. Throwing up a lot of cake with little liquid in your stomach is not pleasant. It is slow. Imagine chewed-up saliva-y cake, having to bring that up and spit it out. Like a paste. So I'd do that, and never get it all back up and out again. And the physical exertion of forcing myself to vomit meant my nose and eyes ran, and I'd sweat a lot and have to spit a lot. It was overall a pretty gross experience. And then I'd wash my face, because usually there was splashback from the vomit hitting the toilet water, and I'd wash my hands, of course, and I'd brush my teeth, and feel wrecked for the rest of the day. I could still taste the cake in my mouth for a long time after. The cake and the stomach acid. And I'd say: that's the last time.

Reading Wallace was therapeutic for me during this period. I don't use the word *therapeutic* flippantly; in the absence of talking to my psychologist, or even a close friend, Wallace was the person I spent the most time with that year. I know how that sounds, but reading his work felt like having a conversation, albeit one-sided, with a really good friend. This wasn't always pleasant. Really good friends know when to not let you off the hook. When I read Wallace, whether it was fiction or non-fiction, I felt seen and known and understood. Sometimes I felt that way with something Wallace said in his essays, or in an interview transcript, and sometimes it was with one of his characters that I assumed were a kind of projection of the author himself (I did, by this point, know about the risks of conflating author and work, but I didn't have to analyse or defend my reading of Wallace to anyone, so I ignored all that). If you recall, this is what Felski described as the experience of 'recognition'.

What I should add re: the above, is that, per Felski, 'Recognition is far from synonymous with reconciliation.'[303] And this is especially relevant to the character of Meredith Rand, who appears in *The Pale King* and who might be the main reason that I associate reading Wallace with going into recovery for my eating disorder. Meredith was institutionalized for self-harm when she was an adolescent. She's a cutter. Her husband, Ed Rand, was also her nurse at the psych hospital she was sent to, where they met. In §46 of *The Pale King*, Meredith talks about her self-harm with her coworker, Shane Drinion. She tells Drinion about a series of late-night conversations with Ed, and how through these *tête-à-têtes*, Ed helped her identify her problem, which was basically that her

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[303] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 31.

cutting was related to her self-esteem and how she saw her physical appearance as the source of her power, but that she actually felt disempowered by this, but even so she had no sympathy for herself because it was a very self-pitying and banal problem to have and she had no right to complain, and that the banality, recognising the banality, didn't stop her from feeling unhappy, and how it overall just left her feeling trapped in a box and lonely and like a piece of meat but also knowing she wasn't unique or special and how cutting let out the ugliness that she felt her physical appearance masked. She tells Drinion how Ed, during one of these *tête-à-têtes*, told her that 'there is a particular kind of stage of life where you get cut off from the, like, unself-conscious happiness and magic of childhood . . . but later in life and puberty it's possible to leave that childhood freedom and completeness behind but still remain totally immature'.[304] I was twenty-two or twenty-three at the time and self-conscious, especially about wanting to not appear immature even though I was fairly sure that there was something immature, if beyond my conscious control at that stage, about being afraid of a lemon curd cupcake, and so I was especially sensitive to Meredith's story. Meredith continued, saying more about how Ed told her she was '[i]mmature in the sense of waiting or wanting some magical daddy or rescuer to see you and really know and understand you and care as much about you as a child's parents do, and save you. Save you from yourself.'[305] And I remember being in therapy later and making a point of saying to my psychologist that I knew that I was responsible for myself and my actions, and that I certainly didn't, that I knew I couldn't really blame anyone else for my eating disorder, like, for example, my parents. Of course on some not-too-deep level I did, and I definitely wanted to blame anyone else but me. But I figured it was what I should say to appear well-adjusted in front of my psychologist, even though both of us were well aware that I was not sitting on her cream-coloured couch on a weekly basis because I was a well-adjusted person. She couldn't even persuade me to eat a strawberry in our sessions, which fruit has like zero calories in it and I would know because I'd Googled it.

The point is that, whether I would admit it or not, I would have preferred to say that my eating disorder was not my fault and that I deserved to be saved from it, and myself. I probably thought my psychologist would save me from myself, but I learned real quick that therapy is not salvation, not the way we'd think of salvation, anyway. If I'm being honest, what unsettled me most about Meredith Rand was that I had always considered myself a very mature person from a young age and I believed I could prove this to people through the aforementioned achieving of things, such as going to university, holding down jobs, being fiscally responsible, and just generally not behaving like your stereotypical bratty teenager. This image I had of myself was obliterated every time I had an anxiety attack over having to eat potatoes. But no matter how much I hated this about myself, I simply and stubbornly did not want to put on weight. And I found this all *really unfair*. Meredith says that Ed

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[304] David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2011), p. 498.
[305] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 498.

tells her that 'he was the only person there [in the hospital, or maybe even the world] who'd really tell [her] the truth about [her] problem, which he said was basically that [she] needed to grow up.'[306] '[A]nd that "grow up" meant *now*, right this second, and quit being childish, because it would kill [her].'[307] I knew this to be true of my problem, too, but that didn't mean I liked seeing it written out in black and white text for me. It also didn't mean I threw the book at the wall, or that I loved it any less, or that I wasn't in fact very grateful to have someone just tell me to grow up even if, in the end, and if we want to be literal about it, that person was in a roundabout way really me and not Meredith or Wallace. This, I believe, is what Felski means when she says recognition is not the same as reconciliation, or that 'to be like a character is not synonymous with *liking* a character: a felt affinity can be underwritten by diverse, conflicting, or ambivalent affects'.[308] I did not like what I saw of myself in Meredith, but I couldn't deny we had things in common.

Felski says '[w]e can value literary works precisely because they force us – in often unforgiving ways – to confront our failings and blind spots rather than shoring up our self-esteem.'[309] Identifying with a character, she writes, 'does not simply entrench a prior self but may enrich, expand, or amend it'.[310] 'The phrase "shock of recognition" is not just a cliché. We can be sustained, but also disconcerted, by a felt kinship with a fictional figure'.[311] Although there have been many instances of this for me with Wallace's work, Meredith is the example *par excellence* of this experience of recognition. In identifying with her, I was forced to confront my own self-harm and, I can tell you now, many years on, it helped me change my behaviour. The mechanics of how this experience of recognition took effect in me, however, are a little trickier to articulate. In the world of Wallace's novel, Meredith just stops cutting herself. She says she doesn't do it anymore because Ed tells her it doesn't matter, in the end, why she cuts herself. All that matters is that she stops. 'That was it . . . You only stop if you stop. Not if you wait for somebody to explain it in some magic way that will presto change-o make you stop.'[312] Which is ironic, in hindsight, since Meredith has just basically described how she had someone explain her problem to her in a way that presto change-o apparently made her stop cutting herself, but that wasn't what I was paying attention to at the time of my earlier readings of Wallace's novel. At the time, I was just taking it all as a very blunt hint that I needed to make a choice about how to treat myself, and that this choice wouldn't be easy because I couldn't have it both ways—I either wanted to get better or I wanted to keep my eating disorder—and that I could no longer kid myself about that. I was suddenly aware that I could drag my feet all I want and throw any number of tantrums about the unfairness of the situation, but if I wanted to get better and not spend an

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[306] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 496.
[307] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 497.
[308] Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi, *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 79.
[309] Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 48.
[310] Anderson, Felski, and Moi, p. 81.
[311] Anderson, Felski, and Moi, p. 81.
[312] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 486.

entire morning torturing myself over a prune then the adult decision I had to make was, in the end, to grow up and accept that it would be hard work, that this hard work would involve putting on weight, it had to, and that it was hard work I would have to do if I wanted to survive this thing. I wasn't at death's door, weight-wise, but the logical end to this whole self-starvation thing, if left unchecked, meant that that would be where I'd end up, and this was a piece of information I had to start absorbing quick smart. Moreover, if being underweight didn't get me, there would likely be some kind of longer-term physical consequence of starvation that would. For me that consequence was low bone density. The more I starved myself, the more I starved my bones, and being in my twenties and being osteoporotic meant that something like falling over, let alone down stairs, might well be disastrous for me, rather than only embarrassing. On the whole, anorexia nervosa has been a very unglamorous disease, despite what the ethereal and waifish images of women's rib cages might have otherwise suggested.

What I had needed to hear from Meredith, that I hadn't known I needed to hear, was that this, all of this, would be up to me. Given that self-starvation was a misguided and perverse attempt to feel 'in control' of my body and my life, it was kind of funny that being in control over my food was no longer within my control and, moreover, that choosing to eat again was the only arena in which I really would be in control. As Meredith says: 'Nobody else can make me cut it out; only I can decide to stop it'.[313] This was my chance to take ownership of myself, to actually behave like an adult instead of wishing just to be seen as one. And that, of course, meant understanding that the whole self-harm thing, whatever your chosen method, was immature. And that didn't mean I was a bad person—there was no point adding another layer of self-loathing to everything—it just meant that I wasn't being mature, as regards how I treated and valued myself. Meredith comes to understand that her cutting is her 'being mean' to herself, 'which was childish' and disrespectful.[314] She learns that it's her job and her job alone to see and to treat herself like she's 'really worthwhile'.[315] 'It's called,' she says, 'being responsible instead of childish'.[316]

Meredith's story is one of conversion, in theory. *The Pale King* actually contains several stories of conversion. These stories suggest a simple fix, by way of an epiphany, to complex personal problems. Ed tells Meredith to cut out the cutting, and she does (or says she does). It should have been obvious at the time but it wasn't until later that I understood my own reading experience as something akin to conversion. That sounds religious and off-putting, but what I mean is that 'conversion' for me simply meant that reading the book changed me in a way that felt profound and lasting. Of course every experience we have changes us, but I think the importance we assign each experience comes

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[313] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 506.
[314] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 506.
[315] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 506.
[316] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 506.

down to a difference in degree. My experience of recognition with *The Pale King* was, to say the least, significant.

So, yes, I thought I had some kind of conversion experience reading *The Pale King* and this was something I later attributed to reading Wallace in general. As I've gotten a little older, though, I know that this idea of conversion is simplistic and dishonest. As Wallace wrote elsewhere: 'In reality, genuine epiphanies are extremely rare'.[317] 'In contemporary adult life,' he adds, 'maturation and acquiescence to reality are gradual processes, incremental and often imperceptible'.[318] And this is perhaps a more truthful account of going into recovery for (which really just means learning to manage) my eating disorder. It certainly didn't happen overnight. I have learned, many times over, that you will not recover from an eating disorder by having an epiphany. In this sense, what Meredith says about how knowing why you're doing it won't stop you doing it is 100% correct, even if I don't agree that there's no value in understanding the etiology. At 23 or so years old, I found the imperative to 'cut it out' very attractive because it meant I couldn't be compelled to overthink why I found eating hard. It didn't matter why I starved my body. I just had to stop. Being a bit older now, I think the suggestion that 'you only stop if you stop' is irresponsible, especially when in this context the suggestion, or imperative, is made to a vulnerable young woman who is obviously cutting herself for a reason, and having her perspective on it all dismissed, especially by some guy who probably has no earthly idea what it's like to be a teenage girl who is the consistent recipient of relentless and innumerable messages from let's just call it 'society' that she needs to be physically pleasing in order to get anywhere in life, is simply not helpful and probably adding to the problem (not to mention the sketchy nature of him crossing certain professional boundaries in these *tête-à-têtes* with Meredith). There is a time for tough love and a time for compassion. I guess back in 2014 I was looking for tough love.

Just because an epiphany isn't a cure doesn't make my experience of reading Meredith's story any less real or impactful, though. The epiphany is just the beginning of something much longer. Many years later I read an article on formative fictions that helps explain this process. Joshua Landy writes that certain texts function 'as training grounds for . . . capacities'.[319] Landy says that when we engage with texts, we don't just gain knowledge but skills. These might be skills in 'rational thinking, at maintaining necessary illusions, at achieving tranquility of mind, or even at religious faith'.[320] The things we read give us 'know-how'; 'rather than attempting to instruct by means of their content, they hone capacities by means of their form'.[321] Rather than seducing the reader with 'the promise of instantaneous transformation', a promise we've come to attribute to this idea of the epiphany, these

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[317] David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, (London: Abacus, 2001), p. 150.
[318] Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 150.
[319] Joshua Landy, 'Formative Fictions: Imaginative Literature and the Training of the Capacities', *Poetics Today,* 33 (2012), 169.
[320] Landy, p. 169.
[321] Landy, p. 169.

texts recognise 'that change is a matter of sustained and patient practice'.[322] Early on in my sessions with my psychologist, Marie, we discussed how my eating disorder and anxiety are sustained by habits. These habits, it was news to me, had for a long time been my coping mechanisms. Marie felt my habits no longer served me, that I had (or should have) outgrown them and any usefulness they once had for me. Fortunately for me, she said, I could form new habits. This, as anyone who's tried to kick a bad habit can attest, is easier said than done. The way Marie described it was that habits are well-worn pathways in the brain. She told me to imagine walking through an overgrown field (or patch of grass or whatever, I can't really recall). The first time you tread through the knee-high grasses, she said, you meet with resistance. But if you tread that path many times over a long period of time you will have created a trail. This trail provides a clear way through the field or patch of grass or whatever. It is easy to follow. It makes crossing that field easier and more efficient. I think you see her point. I sure did. I know that my disease is one that thrives on feeling in control. Habits are predictable, and predictability gives me the illusion of control. Marie assured me that with time I would develop new habits, but changing habits is a matter of taking detours from overtrodden paths and creating new ones. This, in my experience, is a deeply uncomfortable process and one that, necessarily, requires me to be out of my predictable routines. The problem with a bad habit like starving myself is that when things feel unpredictable and when I feel out of control, I go right back to this coping mechanism because it makes me feel safe. As you can see, it's an awkward but forceful feedback loop. Which is why backsliding, defaulting to old habits, is not unusual.

As with the formation of the old habit, making new habits is also a process of repetition. Maybe this is why Wallace's work, for all its interesting excursions through different and harrowing and wacky premises, returns over and over to the same themes and ideas—I've always understood Wallace to be a writer preoccupied with growing up and with mental health, although it's also possible I'm just projecting. It's not so much that his work is repetitive as it is, I'd suggest, obsessed. Whatever the case, the repetition is important and intimately connected to my attempts to kick my old habits. Even in the sixty or so pages taken to tell Meredith's story, she repeats herself enough times to really drive home the whole 'self-harm doesn't help' message. She asks Drinion if he finds listening to her boring. Drinion replies that boring isn't the right word for it. He says that Meredith repeats, or says over again in different words, certain parts of her story and this adds no new information to her account, but that it's not boring; in fact, he adds, the parts that Meredith does repeat register to him instead as demonstrating 'a concern that what [she's] imparting might be unclear or uninteresting and must get recast and resaid in many different ways to assure [herself] that the listener really understands [her]'.[323] This makes sense to me, and reading Meredith's various, if repetitive, explanations of her behaviour was helpful, inasmuch as it felt like looking at my own behaviour as a

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[322] Landy, p. 169.
[323] Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 501-02.

kind of prism, whereby glancing off its various edges could get me closer to the entire shape of things, so then I could at least know what I was up against. If I were to analyse the whole experience, I would say that in reading Meredith's section, reading Wallace in general—whose work, and whose self-commentary on his work, was on loop with ideas that challenged my own understanding of who I was, what I wanted, and why I was doing what I was doing to myself—I was training to 'recover'. Obviously I wasn't thinking about this at the time. At the time mostly what I thought about was how Wallace made me feel unalone and comforted. For me, reading Wallace was therapeutic and formative and it helped me to get better. This sounds, perhaps, overly abstract and mystical, but nevertheless that's how I felt. And to quote from *The Pale King*, 'a feeling is a feeling, nor can you argue with results'.[324]

Landy says that when it comes to formative fictions, the reader must choose to actively engage with the text if she is to be changed by it; he adds, 'a text issues offers, not injunctions; and . . . it is less an obligation than a gift, one we are always free to leave unopened. Formative fictions never force themselves upon us. Without our active participation, they will not do their work'.[325] The moment I recognised myself in Meredith did not make me stop having an eating disorder and it did not stop me having anxiety. I did, however, take up the offer the novel made me. Since then, I have gained enough weight to get my period back, and, depending on the day, I can be okay about eating prunes and strawberries and lemon curd cupcakes. I haven't had an argument with my mum about potatoes in years. I'm doing fair to middling about food in general. I still think about what I eat a lot, but comparatively I do think about it less. This is what recovery looks like, even if how it looks is underwhelming. And though the gains are modest, the process almost imperceptible in the day to day, it's in stark contrast with where I was at in 2014. Landy says that the effects of formative fictions are delayed-release; their immediate impact 'is always subtle [but] their overall impact . . . is as diffuse as it is profound. Formative fictions begin from the assumption that there are, in life, no quick fixes'.[326] This is something I have learned the hard way. And experience tells me that I will have to manage my eating disorder and anxiety, with varying degrees of difficulty and ease, for the rest of my life.

Perhaps now it would be prudent to jump forward four years, to 2018, when I was in America on my Fulbright scholarship and when, in September that year, I broke my spine. When it all happened, I was informed that it could take 3-6 months to heal, and that this meant I should avoid exercise, even walking, for an indefinite period of time. On hearing this news, I felt the following things and in this order: panicked that I couldn't exercise for 3-6 months; worried about if there would be long-term damage; paranoid that I had 'done this to myself' because maybe my bone density is my fault since I've had an eating disorder and I've been starving my body so my bones leach calcium and that's why my back broke so easily; mad at myself that I was panicked about not exercising for 3-6

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[324] Wallace, *The Pale King*, p. 230.
[325] Landy, p. 199.
[326] Landy, p. 200.

months; scared that my insurance wouldn't pay for my treatment; panicked that I couldn't exercise for 3-6 months. In that order. On loop. I started making plans, and ignoring that I was making plans, to restrict my food. Very soon, excluding dinner, my daily intake was one banana, a 16oz Americano containing four shots of espresso, a 210-calorie protein bar cut into eight bites, and, only rarely, when I could convince myself to drink it, a glass of milk (for the calcium, you see). It was perhaps only two or so weeks after I broke my spine that I started walking the 2.2 miles to the university to attend my classes. I went back to the gym, picking up some pathetic pink 2lb dumbbells and promising myself that any movement that aggravated the sharp pain behind my shoulder blades I would modify. It was easy to pretend that what I was doing when my I fractured my spine wasn't what I was doing because it was winter in Illinois, and I was wearing seven layers and two pairs of pants because I was cold and probably underweight. I slipped once, on black ice, walking to the bus stop, and I was lucky I was wearing seven layers and two pairs of pants and that the fall didn't do any further damage. A backslide like this, if you'll forgive the pun, is, as I've intimated elsewhere, a gradual and easy-to-ignore process, especially if you're actively ignoring it, as I was. When I got home to the South Australian summer, however, and I started wearing shorts and sleeveless tops again, the man I used to buy chicken from told me I'd very obviously lost weight. There is still a part of me that is pleased to be told this, but I really couldn't tell you why.

While all this was going on, I was having to rethink my unquestioning love for Wallace as in May of that year Mary Karr tweeted about how Wallace had been abusive to her in their relationship. Though this is not directly related to my spine breaking, or my eating disorder, it has indirectly become a significant part of my overall story, as regards reading Wallace. All you need to know is that, though an uncomfortable process, it ended up being worthwhile confronting the reasons why I was still attached to Wallace and his work even in light of these accusations. In reflecting on how reading him had helped me go into recovery for my eating disorder, I had to confront that I had backslid and that I was close to a full relapse. Taking a good hard look at Wallace meant taking a good hard look at myself. And it became quite clear to me, yet again, that I had a choice to make and that this choice wouldn't be easy because I couldn't have it both ways—I either wanted to get better (and wanted to be able to say, truthfully and, I suppose, as some kind of defence or explanation for my continued attachment to my problematic fave, that reading Wallace was helping me do this with some degree of success) or I wanted to keep my eating disorder. In choosing the former, I had to go back to his work, to re-read the sections that I would later refer to when describing how they had helped me make this choice the first time, back in 2014. I had to re-inhabit that reading experience, which, although I view the whole thing a little differently now, with the benefit of hindsight, helped me to do the work of getting better all over again.

In August 2019, eight months after returning from America, I had my next bone density scan. The results were pretty much static. My spine was a bit better, my hip a bit worse, my forearm the same. That's not bad. It's not good. It could be worse. I have had my period regularly for well over a

year now, so I don't need to go on the pill for the oestrogen. There are still days where I can't convince myself to drink a glass of milk. One of these days was yesterday. And the truth is, still, that I would not be doing this well if it weren't for reading Wallace.

David Foster Wallace is my friend

Dear David Foster Wallace:

I'm embarrassed to be a fan of yours. When I sat down to write this letter, I Googled 'David Foster Wallace fan' and one of the top three results was a question posed on Quora: 'How is it to date an Infinite Jest/David Foster Wallace fan?'[327] This question is loaded. There have been reports circulating online for years now that your fans are not that pleasant to interact with (and especially unpleasant to date). Here is a sample: 'Why Insufferable People Love *Infinite Jest*,' 'Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace,' 'Reclaiming David Foster Wallace from the Lit-Bros,' so on and etcetera. Yikes. As far as the Quora question goes, on September 5, 2018 (the timing is significant, given what resurfaced in May that year about your abuse of Mary Karr—you weren't alive to see it happen, but you should know that over time your apparent misogyny has become associated with your fan base) Marie Mundaca, fellow fan and designer of many interiors of your books, posted an answer:

> Male or female? New fan or old fan? I'm sure some of the men who dated me found me insufferable. One, every time I made a mistake, would say, "I thought you were so smart?" Others would say, "I hope you gt [sic] the help you need." But I think I'm awesome to date. I will bake you brownies and listen to your stories and massage your occiput—don't worry, I'm licensed to do that.

> However, I imagine your question is about dating a DFW "bro," a newish fan who thinks he's super-smart and clever and is a mansplainer and a manspreader. That doesn't sound like much fun. I suggest you make a flowchart and see where it leads you (j/k).

> But, like the gen-pop, we're all individuals. Weigh the pros and cons.

I wish I were blessed with Marie's equanimity, but I have little of that when it comes to you. Tbh, I'm a little crestfallen that I wasn't a fan at the peak of your popularity. I only started reading you in 2012. That was around when things started going sour, or so the online opinion pieces attest. The cultural capital of being your fan has since reversed, and in quite a spectacular fashion.

Jason Rhode wrote that '[o]ne of the most unpleasant people [he] ever knew adored *Infinite Jest*—just loved it. Once, [this person] lifted the book to his lips, and kissed it'.[328] This seems a flimsy correlation, but in my office I have an A2 blow-up print of you standing in front of a cornfield, so I'm not a fair judge. I've never kissed your book, by the way. I have hugged it to my chest, though, and cried a little. Rhode, by way of explaining your fans' devotion to *Infinite Jest*, writes that '[t]he

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[327] See: https://www.quora.com/How-is-it-to-date-an-Infinite-Jest-David-Foster-Wallace-fan
[328] Jason Rhode, 'Why Insufferable People Love Infinite Jest'*,* (Paste Magazine, 2018).

relationship between a good author and a reader leans towards the spooky.'[329] I agree. But I think Rhode stops short. He only writes about people who love your work. What about people who love *you*?

I'm not, like, super worried about all this—if I want to shake off your fans' reputation, I could just outgrow you. Julius Taranto wrote about this very process online; he said he's ashamed of how much he used to love your work. I'm reminded of a Kendrick Lamar lyric: *when the shit hit the fan, is you still a fan?* It seems any relationship with you must be disclosed publicly, including the break-up. I figure if I've got to talk about our relationship with *someone*, it should be you.

Aspiring to insouciance,
Grace

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[329] Rhode.

Dear David Foster Wallace:

If I were to go around telling people that you were my friend, I think it would raise eyebrows. But why should it, when it was you who said that you saw your relationship with your reader as being 'like a late-night conversation with really good friends, when the bullshit stops and the masks come off'?[330] I should maybe (but obvs am not going to) leave off mentioning that, in the same breath, you also said when you were younger that you saw your relationship with your reader 'as sort of a sexual one.'[331] The less said about that the better, given your reputation of late. For what it's worth, when I was younger—can you believe it's been, like, eight years so far that I've been writing about you?—I was infatuated with you. As your reader, I felt you and I were communing. I wonder if you can relate? You once said that for you 'a fair amount of aesthetic experience is . . . erotic'. You said you thought it had to do with 'this weird kind of intimacy with the person who made it.[332] It's possible I'm overly reliant on the things you said.

You said that there's 'a relationship set up between the reader and the writer that's very strange and very complicated and hard to talk about'.[333] You said you wanted your 'stuff' (your casualness so endearing, btw) to 'make people feel less lonely'.[334] And when I read you, I do. You also said there's 'some weird, delicate, I-trust-you-not-to-fuck-upon-me [sic??] relationship between the reader and the writer, and both have to sustain it.'[335] I was charmed to think that I had such an important role, a role at all(!), to play in our relationship. I think if people understood the dynamic you set up with your reader, the one you've gone to lengths to articulate, to set the terms for, they might understand why your fans are so attached to you. The lit-bro phenomenon that dogs your legacy I find harder to explain, but as they say, boys will be boys.

Oh I know it's, for me at least, metaphysically impossible to be your friend. How can you have a friend who's not just physically absent but literally gone? I know my friendship with you is something far more abstract than, say, getting coffee with my friend in real life. I would never feel comfortable calling you Dave—I know that's what your real-life friends called you. But is it so ludicrous to think we're confidantes, of a kind? You didn't have me in mind while you wrote, but maybe you had someone like me in mind?

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[330] Anne Marie Donahue, 'David Foster Wallace Winces at the Suggestion That His Book Is Sloppy in Any Sense', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Stephen Burn (Jackson: Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 70-73 (p. 71).
[331] Donahue, p. 71.
[332] Lipsky, p. 72.
[333] Laura Miller, 'The Salon Interview', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Stephen Burn (Jackson: Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 58-66 (p. 62).
[334] Bryan A. Garner, *Quack This Way: David Foster Wallace & Bryan A. Garner Talk Language and Writing*, (Dallas: RosePen Books, 2013), p. 16.
[335] McCaffery, p. 25.

Ever hopeful,

Your friend,

Grace

Dear David Foster Wallace:

It's weird how seemingly unrelated encounters in my life lead me back to you. In May of 2018, when you were catching heat on Twitter, I was auditing a graduate course in creative non-fiction at the University of Texas, Austin. I thought the term 'creative non-fiction' was an oxymoron. How can something be 'not made-up' but also creative in, what I'd always figured must be, a fictional sense? I hadn't read much creative non-fiction back then, needless to say.

I didn't give the genre a second thought until I was auditing that course at UT, when all we did was read and talk about creative non-fiction. It's only with the benefit of hindsight that I can appreciate how so much of what I experienced in 2018 led me to write these letters to you, years later. Here's one of those things: one of my classmates in that writing workshop, Anushka, submitted a piece that was a series of letters addressed to a 'Melissa' about Emily Dickinson's letters addressed to a 'Master'. I wish I'd added Anushka on Twitter, even though I don't use it, so we could've stayed in the barest kind of touch once that course ended. I want to thank her for her piece, the impact of which was not truly felt by me until years later. Do you know (of course you don't, how could you) that Anushka references Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* in the letters? I remember borrowing Felski's book from the Perry-Castañeda Library and photographing every page before I had to return it. This was before I changed my thesis project in 2019, a change brought on in no small way by Felski's work on postcritique. All I knew back in the Spring of 2018 was that something was happening inside my brain. I felt energised about research again, in a way that threw into relief the stagnancy I'd settled into with my current project. But even then I wasn't thinking about any of this in relation to you.

It was in that same class that I also first read Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, and many other pieces that ended up bearing on my writing in a way that was transformative—I might still be doing my original thesis project on the protracted adolescence of U.S. citizens (gulp) if it weren't for actually going to America. I read many women writers in that class and wrote alongside mostly women writers (of twelve grad students, eleven of us were female). And it's since occurred to me that throughout my degree I've been surrounded by women who were, in direct and oblique ways, writing about and for women. Statistically I'm sure this isn't odd, it's just that for reasons that don't bear psychoanalysing here, partly because they're probably not all that complicated, I have usually looked for guidance from men. And I have for a long time actively avoided contemplating women or what it means to me to be one. When I look back (albeit perhaps uncharitably) on my first thesis project I can see I was writing a lot about ideas of authority—a specifically male kind. *The Pale King* is a very male book, but you know that. Now, I'm actively contemplating what it means for me to be a woman, especially when it comes to loving you. None of this probably feels startlingly original to you, though obviously it's come as a slow shock to me.

In one of the 'Melissa' letters, Anushka introduces this idea of 'apostrophe'. Apostrophe is a form of address, 'a rhetorical figure in which the speaker directly and often emotionally addresses a

person who is dead or absent, an imaginary or nonhuman entity, or a place, or concept (usually an abstract idea or ideal)'.[336] I think you could fall under at least two of these categories. Of the Master letters, Anushka wrote that Dickinson's one-sided address was a delightful form of epistolary apostrophe. Anushka then asked 'Melissa' if she's ever read Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*. I read *I Love Dick* recently, quite apart from anything to do with these letters to you. I'll admit, I was glad I read it, but I wasn't sure I understood it. It was only when I had the idea to write letters to you that it sort of, like, clicked. *I Love Dick* is narrated by the author, Chris Kraus. Chris becomes infatuated with Dick, her husband's colleague. Kraus, in collaboration with her husband, writes love letters to Dick. I don't know if you've read it, so I won't spoil the ending. Let me just say that in reading more about the initially cold critical reception to Kraus's novel (accusations of it being too confessional, abject, narcissistic, shameless, etc.), and its eventual becoming a cult feminist text,[337] I feel like there's something in *I Love Dick*, in terms of both form and content, that's useful, relevant, probably cathartic, and applicable to our relationship. I want to explore these ideas with you, but I have for a long time had my inhibitions about doing so, especially in my academic work, which I've always assumed needs to be objective and impersonal. I shouldn't like to get the frosty reception that Kraus's novel received back in the late nineties. Hopefully we've made some progress since then, and if not, perhaps there'll be someone writing about my female consciousness in twenty years' time.

Watch this space,
Grace

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[336] Murfin, p. 27.

[337] For a good discussion of *I Love Dick*, with the benefit of nearly two decade's hindsight, see: Leslie Jamison, 'This Female Consciousness: On Chris Kraus', *The New Yorker,* (2015) <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/this-female-consciousness-on-chris-kraus> [accessed 8/3/2020].

Dear David Foster Wallace:

When I read your short story, 'Good Old Neon,' I thought you were so utterly inside my brain that we must have known each other already and forever. You and I were exactly alike, but you were the more articulate one. I checked your birth date. You're a Pisces. I'm a Cancer. We're meant to be good in relationships. I'll ignore that my father is also a Pisces and we are no longer in contact. Horoscopes are only fun to believe in when they tell me what I want to hear. Jensen Ackles is also a Pisces. I had a poster of him on my wall when I was in high school. Sometimes it still blows my mind that as I go about my day, here, in Adelaide, Jensen Ackles is somewhere out there, probably in Texas, doing something at the exact same moment! I can't say the same for you and that feels unfair. I used to believe everything happens for a reason until I wrote my Honours thesis on you and Camus; by then my belief was that food was scary and that everything that happened was pointless. I dreamed of food, and you.

Your fellow water-monger,
Grace

Dear David Foster Wallace:

I have been reading about female parasites. Anna Watkins Fisher wrote about how the art of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle is 'parasitical'.[338] Fisher says that parasitism can 'articulate itself as an experimental art practice as well as a performance model for contemporary feminist politics'.[339] She expands on this by talking about how a younger generation of feminist artists are 'performing "feminism" back to itself,' and in doing this (that is, by performing as the very caricatures that represent feminism) they are reimagining a feminism that's more viable, one that's 'capable of assimilating irony and equivocality for its tactical gain'.[340] In their art, feminist parasites (a delicious term, don't you think?) like Kraus and Calle, 'destabilize patriarchal forms by seizing upon the gendered analogy of the "correspondence" between the feminized parasite and her masculinized host'.[341]

In Kraus's work, and here, too, in mine, the chosen form of correspondence is letters. Fisher writes that 'the love letter represents a state of play by which gendered opponents feed on each other in a dynamically unstable game'.[342] You can't reply to my letters, which in a way stabilises this game to serve my interests. We will have to imagine your response, kind of like the character of 'Q.' in your 1999 short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Though truth be told, as with Q. your response need never appear in these letters for me to make my point. In *I Love Dick*, 'Dear Dick' stands in the stead of 'Dear Diary,' and, Fisher argues, 'the form of the letter becomes a means of transforming Dick from subject to object, writer to text, critic to critique'.[343] It sounds kind of clinical, like a process of abstraction. But I suppose this isn't the first time that's been done to you.

Since I brought it up, I want to talk about your Q. and her correspondence with those hideous men. There's a lot of critical back and forth about Q. and your collection of stories. You said to your former teacher, back in 1998, that *Brief Interviews*, the project of that book, was feminist; specifically, 'A parody (a feminist parody) of feminism'.[344] It's a pithy thesis statement, but you left a lot of us wondering what a feminist parody of feminism really even means. Adam Kelly sums up our unease: 'what should the reader make of this [feminist] description of a set of stories that feature virtually no female voices amid a cacophony of misogynistic male ones?'[345] The most obviously absent female

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[338] Both Kraus and Calle have used the epistolary form in their work. See, of course, Kraus's *I Love Dick* (1997) and Calle's artwork, later turned into a book (2007), titled *Take Care of Yourself* (when Calle's boyfriend broke-up with her by email, she asked 107 women to read the letter and to interpret/analyse/respond to/understand it according to their professional interest.

[339] Fisher, p. 223.

[340] Fisher, p. 223.

[341] Fisher, p. 223.

[342] Fisher, p. 224.

[343] Fisher, p. 228.

[344] Wallace qtd. in Mary K. Holland, '"By Hirsute Author": Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* 58 (2017), 64.

[345] Adam Kelly, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men', in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Ralph Clare (2018), pp. 82-96 (p. 83).

voice in this collection is Q.'s, whom you have conduct the interviews with the hideous men that appear throughout the collection. She has no name. She has no voice. We can only imagine what she thinks and how she feels about being talked at and talked down to by men who've made an art form of gaslighting and who are queasily forthcoming with 'talking through their fundamental hostility to women'.[346]

It's hardly news to your fans that your 'writing of both female characters and romantic relationships is patchy, at best'.[347] Clare Hayes-Brady suggests that your 'lack of engagement with female characters is palpable throughout [your] work and may account, in part, for the heavy bias towards the Y chromosome that characterizes [your] readership'.[348] And yet, your reader was always a 'she',[349] as you referred to her. I always liked that about you (although was this invocation of a female reader affected? Hayes-Brady also suggests that your work was 'created in that strange crucible where toxic masculinity and virtue-signalling feminist language meet' in the figure of '"the woke misogynist"'. [350] Do you identify?). We can draw easy and perhaps uncharitable comparisons between the role of Q. in *Brief Interviews* and your female reader; she also has no name and no voice. She is the next container for the consciousness you poured into your books. But then again, as far as the writer-reader relationship goes, you were adamant you wanted an active reader. You said you didn't want your reader to forget that 'she's receiving heavily mediated data, that this process is a relationship between the writer's consciousness and her own. and that in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship, she's going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work'.[351] So who knows.

Anyway, you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't; I'd be criticising you if you'd always referred to your reader as a 'he', too. Issues of gender are fraught that way, but we carry on! Of the few female characters you *do* write, Hayes-Brady notes that 'they are, almost uniformly, engaged in struggles to tell their own stories, either because they have difficulty with language or because someone else is trying to tell their story for them'.[352] The interviews in your collection hinge on the presence of Q., but your reader has to find Q.'s character in her absence, in the silences between the male responses.[353] Hayes-Brady says that this is all part of your feminist project. 'By overtly silencing Q.' and in your refusal 'to even attempt to speak the experience of a marginalized feminine subjectivity,' Hayes-Brady says that you find 'a mode of resistance to the system that mutes female narrative agency, a mode that involves appropriating the features of the oppressive system to

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[346] Clare Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender', in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Philip Coleman (Ipswich, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2015), pp. 63-78 (p. 67).
[347] Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender', p. 64.
[348] Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender', p. 63.
[349] Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender', p. 63.
[350] Hayes-Brady, 'Reading Your Problematic Fave: David Foster Wallace, Feminism and #Metoo', p. 12.
[351] McCaffery, p. 24.
[352] Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender', p. 65.
[353] Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender', p. 68.

draw attention to and subvert the system'.[354] She suggests that Q.'s role in your book offers 'a tentative answer to Marilyn French's call for literature that "may show patriarchal attitudes destroying a character or a world, but the narrative does not approve the destruction"'.[355] But it's a delicate balance to strike, because you're still silencing the woman in your story, and this can also just serve to reinscribe 'forms of masculine power and agency'.[356] When we're not allowed to speak we start believing we're not allowed to speak, you know?

Let's do an about-face; I want to go back to telling you about stories that definitely do not silence their female characters. In *I Love Dick*, the balance of power is reversed. Dick is our Q., although he has the agency to choose not to answer Chris's letters and, when he does respond, the reader hears from him. I guess you could read Kraus's novel as a feminist parody of feminism, too— although the butt of the joke is always patriarchy. Rather than interviews, letters are a way for Kraus (by this I mean both the autofictional 'Chris' and the author 'Kraus,' though it's built-in hard to distinguish between the two—sounds like someone else I know!) to perform femininity and feminism in a way that feeds off of patriarchy. Instead of evading 'charges of hyperfemininity and overdependence,' Chris leans into them.[357] She 'overidentifies' with them, overwhelming the patriarchy by behaving exactly as she's expected to, with an intensity that's unbearable.[358] Fisher writes that this overidentification takes the form of Chris's 'manic insistence' on loving the man who rejects her.[359] The parasite feeds off the host, be it a man or system, or both, and grows. Chris assumes the role of the parasite so she can 'avenge women's (real and performed) hostility toward men, the designated "guilty agents" of their (real and performed) suffering'.[360] The parasite overwhelms the host; the terrain is no longer his, it's hers.

The letters, however, were always Chris's terrain; letters and diaries have traditionally been designated 'benign feminine literary forms'.[361] Kraus isn't the first to mobilise these forms to say something about women's abjection, nor is she the last (nor, I imagine, will I be). The marvellous thing about letters and diaries is that they lend themselves to oversharing. In writing to you, I'm freed up to say things that I'd find awkward to express in person, or that would be considered inappropriate to share in public or, say, scholarship. There's an intimacy to the form that lets me lean into my exhibitionist tendencies. What's become especially interesting to me is that women are mobilising these 'feminine forms' to be something decidedly not benign. Chris divulges herself in ways that might be considered not just extra-feminine but unseemly; her 'oversharing' is a source of power and control. This is, obviously, a massive departure from female silence, and it's uncomfortable to read.

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[354] Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender', p. 68.
[355] Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender', p. 69.
[356] Hayes-Brady, '"Personally I'm Neutral on the Menstruation Point": David Foster Wallace and Gender', p. 68.
[357] Fisher, p. 225.
[358] Fisher, p. 225.
[359] Fisher, p. 225.
[360] Fisher, p. 224.
[361] Fisher, p. 224.

Oversharing is hardly radical, especially online, but until recently I'd never considered it could be empowering. Everything I've read about you suggests you are also leery of being so public. Well, that is, you are a very particular kind of public person. You don't mind sharing the intellectual side of yourself. For me, privacy is about control. From all that I've read about you, I also get the vibe that you're fond of control, the 'being in', the 'having'—you and I have so much in common! So I imagine you'd be sympathetic to how oversharing, at first blush, strikes me as disempowering, as abdication of self-control. Excess, of emotion or opinion or whatever, has always felt crass. I feel this as a woman and a fan—both roles easily judged for their perceived irrationality and hysteria—and I often find myself apologising for my feelings. But Rachel Sykes, in her article '"Who gets to speak and why?" Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women's Writing,' suggests that 'excess' is something that can be harnessed and used; she looks at 'how oversharing, the revelation of "too much" personal information, functions as a literary practice' for women writers.[362] Being a woman and a writer, I find this intriguing.

Sykes says that the charge of oversharing, or being called an oversharer, is an accusation more commonly levelled at women than men.[363] And although the term *oversharing* is a fairly new word, she continues, 'contemporary use of the term is steeped in all-too-familiar misogynies that privilege male subjectivity over female subjectivity and characterize female self-knowledge, and the sharing of that knowledge, as in some way shameful'.[364] If this seems hyperbolic to you, consider that, if oversharing is the act of making something public that is 'inappropriate to a given context,' then it is a term that *is* implicitly loaded against women—we have not historically had much of a hand in setting the context for what we are allowed to share and how it is judged.[365] Sykes argues that we can see this gender bias at work in the critical response to the autobiographical writing of Lena Dunham, Emily Gould, and Sheila Heti, who've often been described as authorial oversharers.[366] Chris Kraus also sits on that list. You were a virtuoso of the pre-emptory strike against criticism, so I hope you can appreciate me mentioning here that, yes, this selection of 'women's writing' is very white and cisgendered. I have no excuse for this; per Sykes, it 'reflects the continued prioritization of white women's experience in Western feminist discourse'.[367] That happens to be my discourse, and it is reflected here, in my letters to you.

The questions at the heart of Sykes's article are these: can oversharing be a mode of dissent in contemporary culture? Can oversharing ever transgress patriarchal norms?[368] Or, does oversharing confine us to 'disempowering modes of communication' because of how it's critically (dis)regarded

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[362] Rachel Sykes, '"Who Gets to Speak and Why?" Oversharing in Contemporary North American Women's Writing', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 43 (2017), 151.
[363] Sykes, p. 158.
[364] Sykes, p. 158.
[365] Sykes, p. 158.
[366] Sykes, p. 158.
[367] Sykes, p. 152.
[368] Sykes, p. 151.

and used as a slur 'primarily aimed at the information-sharing practices of women'?[369] My answers are: sometimes, sometimes, and sometimes. The oversharing in *I Love Dick* could be, and has been, read as needlessly narcissistic. But as a literary practice, the oversharing here is not scattershot, and it's not simple self-indulgence. Sykes says that, for Chris, 'the act of oversharing is the act of writing herself into existence, of forcing a creative praxis from the mundanity of her marriage and reclaiming what she describes as an "active, public 'I'" . . . that might speak beyond the personal to a collective and performative mode of writing'.[370]

And of course it is a performance. It's not fiction but it's also not 'true' in the sense of being an exact representation of things as they happened. 'Just as "Dick" is neither Dick Hebdige nor, really, the subject of *I Love Dick*, so "Chris" is not Chris Kraus but a number of contexts the author inhabits, the impressions she leaves, and the personal details she chooses to reveal'.[371] When we tell a story, what we share or overshare is always a process of selection and heavy mediation (you know this well). Everything Kraus includes in her novel is strategic.

As a literary practice, the effect of oversharing really depends on the writer and the reader. As Kraus's reader, *I Love Dick* shows me what the practice of oversharing can do for a woman who writes. In the context of you, and all the 'stuff' around the edges of your work (you know, the male genius, the lit-bros, #MeToo—in a word: patriarchy) I still find oversharing an uncomfortable experience, but, to quote you, actually, it also feels 'like a gorgeously simple solution to a problem'; 'an experience of what I think Yeats called "the click of a well-made box"'.[372] It's a neat idea. I've always heard the click with your work. But of late, and to quote you again, the women writers who've made a practice out of oversharing, of insisting on being heard, well, their work 'clicks like a fucking Geiger counter'.[373]

More, maybe overly-more, soon.
Grace

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[369] Sykes, pp. 152, 69.
[370] Sykes, p. 169.
[371] Sykes, p. 168.
[372] McCaffery, p. 35.
[373] McCaffery, p. 35.

Dear DFW:

Well I feel like a prize plum. I'll have you know I had to read Toon Staes' article about your untruths in the 'Author Here' sections of *The Pale King* before I learned IRS employees are not, in fact, issued with new Social Security numbers when they join the service. And that you were never kicked out of college for plagiarism.[374] Not that I begrudge myself ignorance on these two things. Nor do I begrudge you the lie, I guess. *The Pale King* is 'fiction' or whatever. I just feel gullible is all, and I'm having a sulk. I hardly took everything you said as gospel, but I did, I guess, hope that when I reached §9 of the novel and you wrote 'Author here. Meaning the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona',[375] that you were really here, or there. And that you were directly addressing me, and not just for some kind of literary embellishment.

But it *was* just some abstract narrative persona. And this seems to be the case not just in your work but in your whole public presence. Michael Franklin Miller's dissertation on you is all about 'the creation of the David Foster Wallace celebrity persona, a persona [Miller calls] the Slacker Genius'.[376] He says that Little, Brown's hyped up publicity campaign for *Infinite Jest* helped transform you from David Foster Wallace into 'a commodified and stylized persona—DFW'.[377] He says DFW 'has become a culturally complex signifier existing parallel to *Infinite Jest*'.[378] What is it like to be a culturally complex signifier? It sounds onerous.

The slacker-genius, Miller says, is the collision between the Romantic creative author-genius and 1990s grunge culture.[379] Your slacker vibe, with your 'trademark bandanna, wire-rimmed glasses, shabby t-shirts, and work boots all index,' according to Miller, a paradoxical 'counter-image of authorial "genius"'.[380] You were a genius, but you were also just like us. Miller claims that you were 'fully cognizant' of how your 'genius' was perceived by critics, and that you knew 'full well what elicited positive critical reactions and what did not,' allowing you to deploy this slacker-genius persona reflexively, 'to exert influence and control over the reception and promotion of' your work.[381]

Boy, did it work on me. One thing I loved about you was your '"dirt bomb" look', when you wore 'thrift-shop T-shirts and torn shorts,' your 'beloved hoodie,' your 'untied Timberland boots and double socks'.[382] I've aped your look for many years. My security-blanket outfit is a baggy pair of 'Boyfriend'-cut jeans (I paid for the rips in the denim, and then had to get my mum to darn a hole when one became too big). With the jeans I wear cheap boots that I wish were Timberlands, and a

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374 Staes, p. 424.
375 Wallace, *The Pale King*, pp. 66-67.
376 Michael Miller, 'Consider David Foster Wallace, or Reconsidering Dfw: Literary Self Fashioning and Slacker Genius', (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2013), (p. iv).
377 Miller, p. 41.
378 Miller, p. 2.
379 Miller, p. 3.
380 Miller, p. 37.
381 Miller, pp. 11, 13.
382 Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*, p. 24.

sweater, also loose-fitting, that my mum bought me, emblazoned with Virginia Woolf's name and the title of her book *To the Lighthouse* (I still haven't read this book, but I'm meaning to, given it's probably a signifier all of its own and I'd like to know what it is I'm 'putting out there' when I wear it). My boyfriend calls my outfit 'Grunge Grace.' It's an homage to you, of course. It's a material statement that you are my security blanket—I hope that's not weird. I hope you take that as a compliment.

But security blankets are meant to be outgrown, or so I've been told. My baggy jeans are comfortable because I have an eating disorder and it's typical of someone with anorexia to wear loose clothes to hide their body—you aren't the only person who wants to control how you're seen. Anorexia is also a security blanket. Over the years I've outworn many pairs of boots, but I can't outgrow my jeans. I gather, from the cut of the jeans, that people are meant to think I borrowed them off my boyfriend. As far as I'm concerned, the jeans are mine. All of which is to say, 'DFW' says something about you, even if it's not the whole truth, or the permanent one.

Cheers,
Grace

Dear David Foster Wallace:

After your suicide in 2008, A. O. Scott wrote a tribute to you, in which he said: 'I suspect that Mr. Wallace's persona—at once unbearably sophisticated and hopelessly naïve, infinitely knowing and endlessly curious—will be his most durable creation'.[383] Is that how you would've wanted to be remembered?

Asking for a friend,
Grace

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[383] A. O. Scott, 'The Best Mind of His Generation', *The New York Times,* (2008) <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html> [accessed 30 April 2020].

Dear David Foster Wallace:

Still thinking about this whole 'DFW' thing. Miller says the Slacker Genius persona was the product of your own authorial self-fashioning, the marketing campaign for *Infinite Jest*, and the book review industry—especially as regards the 'fervor with which reviewers concentrated on [your] alleged genius'.[384] But we know your genius wasn't alleged, it was fact; at least, it was formally recognized and financially endorsed by a MacArthur 'Genius Grant' in 1997. According to Alexander Rocca, you were 'the archetypal "genius" author of the late twentieth century'.[385] But in one of your notebooks you wrote: 'I am a McArthur [sic] Fellow. Boy am I scared. I feel like throwing up. Why? String-free award—nothing but an avowal of their belief that I am a "Genius." I don't feel like a Genius'.[386] Nevertheless, the title stuck. You now belong to a lineage of geniuses that stretches back to the Romantic period, and our fascination with preternaturally smart men shows few signs of abating.

I say men, because the title of genius has historically been and continues to be habitually awarded to men like you. In 2018, and in the updated context of #MeToo, Megan Garber wrote an article on you and the 'dangerous romance of male genius'. In it, Garber emphasises the male condition of 'genius,' describing how genius, 'the way we typically conceive of it, remains infused with the male gaze . . . It is a designation reserved, almost exclusively, for men'.[387] Men that, surprising no-one, are also almost exclusively white. Richard Hishmeh, in his dissertation on 'Romantic Genius and Literary Celebrity in American Literature' writes that this Romantic idea of author-as-genius, an idea now 200+ years old, found its ideal in the archetypical Byronic hero: 'an ostensibly heterosexual white male whose patterns of behavior fluctuate between a complicated brooding and a heroic audaciousness'.[388] 'He is a womanizer and misogynist, but always charming. Like all genius, he too teeters on the brink of madness, falling from fits of creative mania to dark despair; in short, he "feels" more acutely than the average person, and therefore lives more outrageously than average people do'.[389] You, my friend, fit the bill. Tell me, what is it like to live outrageously, rather than apologetically, because of your feelings?

I wonder why this author-as-genius idea persists, even now we've moved on from the Romantic period and are well into postmodernism, the era in which Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault took our ideas of the author apart, deconstructed them, exposed any underlying assumptions of genius as wrong, or at least seriously misguided.[390] Hishmeh says the American writer-genius is a

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[384] Miller, p. 10.

[385] A. Rocca, '"I Don't Feel Like a Genius": David Foster Wallace, Trickle-Down Aesthetics, and the Macarthur Foundation', *Arizona Quarterly,* 73 (2017), 87.

[386] Rocca, p. 100.

[387] Garber.

[388] Hishmeh, p. vi.

[389] Hishmeh, p. 1.

[390] Hishmeh, p. vi.

'philosophically obsolete figure,'[391] (not to mention one that's 'rife with racism, agism, sexism, classism, regionalism, and bigotry')[392] but that 'even in the age of Postmodernism, where the category of genius has been thoroughly deconstructed, genius persists as a viable force in an author's marketability and reputation'.[393] Genius sells, which I believe both you and your publisher well understood.

Garber writes that our 'fealty to genius is its own kind of faith; in exceptionalism, in the fact that gods, still, can walk among us'.[394] Does your story of genius outweigh the story in which you harass, stalk and are violent towards Mary Karr or the other women who've since come forward with their own experiences? Garber thinks so. She says that Karr's story 'has been treated . . . as a complication to another story. In this case, the story of the romantically unruly genius of one David Foster Wallace'.[395] 'Karr's #MeToo stories,' Garber points out, 'were not so much an open secret as an open revelation. They were not hiding in plain sight; they were, worse, strategically ignored. They were the collateral damage of a culture that prefers uncomplicated idols'.[396]

I remember reading about your relationship with Karr in D. T. Max's biography, back when it was published in 2012. It didn't disturb me. Karr's story was unremarkable, except for how, as Garber writes, it fed into 'the broader story (the "greater good") of [your] personal genius: as evidence of [your] uncontainable passion, of the singular depth of [your] wanting'.[397] Ugh, to be desired that much, and by you, no less. I wasn't outraged. I was jealous. When Karr tweeted in 2018, I still wasn't outraged. I'd known this part of your story for years, and I wasn't convinced it should change the way I related to you or your work. I would, indeed, have strongly preferred that it not have any bearing on our relationship at all. I don't think it's that I would prefer an uncomplicated idol—complicated men are so damn interesting, especially the geniuses—so much as my preference is for an idol to be complicated in the right ways.

You seemed ambivalent about being called a genius. When you won the MacArthur Grant, you were talking to your friend Mark Costello about how hard writing was, and he said, 'Dave, you're a genius.' As Costello tells it, he meant by this that 'people aren't going to forget about you. You're not going to wind up in a Wendy's'. And you replied: 'All that makes me think is that I've fooled you, too.'"[398] Maria Bustillos writes that a lot of your work 'has to do with cutting [your]self back down to size,' and she argues that, 'getting rid of the whole idea of special gifts, of the exceptional,

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[391] Hishmeh, p. 1.
[392] Hishmeh, p. 8.
[393] Hishmeh, p. 7.
[394] Garber.
[395] Garber.
[396] Garber.
[397] Garber.
[398] Costello qtd. in Maria Bustillos, 'Inside David Foster Wallace's Private Self-Help Library', *The Awl,* (2011) <https://www.theawl.com/2011/04/inside-david-foster-wallaces-private-self-help-library/> [accessed 30 April 2020].

and of genius, is the most powerful current running through all of [your] work'.[399] In your interview with David Lipsky, you said 'I *treasure* my regular guy-ness. I've started to think it's my biggest asset as a writer. Is that I'm pretty much just like everybody else'.[400]

And it is your biggest asset. Your genius was a selling point but not *the* point of your work, for me. The point of your work was that you were interested in ordinary-ness. It seemed to matter to you that, for example, you felt sad in the afternoon sometimes. And *that* mattered to me because I feel sad in the afternoon sometimes, too (although I suspect sometimes this is low blood sugar, and I should eat something). Bustillos says that the love your admirers bear for you 'has a peculiarly intimate and personal character.' She says this is because you 'gave voice to the inner workings of ordinary human beings in a manner so winning and so truthful and forgiving as to make [you] seem a friend'.[401] You don't only 'seem' like a friend to me. Reading you feels like reading a series of letters, obliquely addressed to Grace Chipperfield—a strange kind of sideways correspondence, sent by someone who 'gets' me.

Yours,
Grace

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[399] Bustillos.
[400] Lipsky, p. 42.
[401] Bustillos.

Dear David Foster Wallace:

I showed a friend some of my letters to you (I hope you don't mind) and he linked me to a YouTube video: 'FAKE FRIENDS EPISODE ONE: intro to parasocial relationships'. In 1956, Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl wrote an article titled, 'Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction'. Essentially, Horton and Wohl were fascinated by how new mass media—radio, television, and movies—would give viewers the 'illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer'.[402] They called this a *parasocial relationship*.[403] A relationship of this kind, in contrast to real-life interpersonal relationships, is in theory zero obligation and minimal effort for me.[404] I can leave you any time I want because I owe you nothing. As a commitment-phobe, that might be the major appeal of a relationship with you. But as a commitment-phile, it's also the least appealing thing about 'us'. The difference between you and me, and me and the friend who linked me that video, is 'the lack of effective reciprocity'. I can share my letters with my friend, and he can respond. But interaction between you, a writer, and me, your reader, is 'one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer [you], and not susceptible of mutual development'.[405] If I find the experience 'unsatisfying,' my only option is 'to withdraw'.[406]

If someone were to ask me how our parasocial relationship started—you know, where we met, what's our story, all that frothy stuff—I'd blush, half-heartedly try to change the subject (no no you don't want to hear about all that!) but then, with a winsome smile, I'd tell them about our first instance of parasocial interaction (PSI, if you like—I know you fancy acronyms). Well it was, how many years now, nearly eight years ago, I'd say. We were introduced by my lecturer, can you imagine, in my literature class. It was love at first sight, or first read, whatever. It was 'Good Old Neon'. Those opening lines: 'My whole life I've been a fraud. I'm not exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired. It's a little more complicated than that, maybe'.[407] I'd never felt so seen. I knew it was the narrator who felt like a fraud, not specifically *you*, but I understood (I think) what you were trying to communicate, which made me feel clever and special. Perhaps the hyper-self-awareness and apparently shameless honesty in a story like 'Good Old Neon' is why I'm so ready to forgive your whole persona thing.

PSI is a situationally-bound experience. I read something you've written, I watch one of your interviews on YouTube, I read someone's opinion on you in some blog or something, and for the time

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[402] Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, 'Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance', *Psychiatry,* 19 (1956), 215.
[403] Horton and Wohl, p. 215.
[404] Horton and Wohl, p. 215.
[405] Horton and Wohl, p. 215.
[406] Horton and Wohl, p. 215.
[407] Wallace, *Oblivion*, p. 141.

that we're together in this experience, I'm having PSI with you. If I like what I see, so to speak, I'll continue to seek these experiences of PSI (I have a receipt that attests to my ordering all your books in one fell swoop after reading 'Good Old Neon'). Repeated PSI will (and did) lead to a long-term parasocial relationship (PSR) with you.[408] According to the literature on PSRs, much like getting to know someone in real life, the more time I spend with you, the more I perceive you to be predictable and reliable, and I, in turn, become more loyal to you.[409] And much like spending time with someone in real life, over time you and I accumulate shared experiences, shaping our own relationship particular to us; you were with me at one of the lowest times in my life, all through the worst part of my eating disorder and anxiety, and that's had no small bearing on how attached I am to you.

I wonder why people get into these kinds of relationships. Some early research, specifically focused on people having PSRs with media figures on TV, proposed that it's about having 'a source of alternative companionship, resulting from "deficiencies" in social life and dependency on television (i.e., as compensation for loneliness)'.[410] But of late it's come to be understood as just 'an extension of normal social activity'.[411] There's no need to pathologise, as my psychologist would say; it's not even all that unusual, nor that modern. Across cultures and histories there are accounts of people forming these PSRs, be it with fiction characters, with celebrities and political figures, or even with gods.[412] Sometimes it gets out of hand, when there's a '[f]ailure to discriminate between PSI and ordinary social activity,'[413] and a person might believe their PSI has been reciprocated by a media figure—like what happened with John Hinckley Jr. and Jodie Foster—but for the most part 'parasocial relationships complement social relationships and are better understood as part of a viewer's social life'.[414] There are similarities between parasocial and social relationships, and although these might never be as salient or intense as the close interpersonal relationships we maintain in our daily lives, our PSRs 'are a constant, large, and important part of [our] social worlds'.[415]

Researchers have tried to work out what qualities a media figure must have or must cultivate to have the potential for a PSR realised. Talking about media personae, Horton and Wohl argued that a bond of intimacy (even if it is an illusion) is essential to create the kind of connection during PSI that might lead to a full-blown PSR. The most common way of creating this bond is for the persona 'to duplicate the gestures, conversational style, and milieu of an informal face-to-face gathering'.[416]

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[408] Mu Hu, 'The Influence of a Scandal on Parasocial Relationship, Parasocial Interaction, and Parasocial Breakup', *Psychology of Popular Media Culture,* 5 (2016), 219.
[409] Hu, p. 219.
[410] David C. Giles, 'Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research', *Media Psychology,* 4 (2002), 280.
[411] Giles, p. 280.
[412] Giles, p. 287.
[413] Giles, pp. 299-300.
[414] Jonathan Cohen, 'Parasocial Breakups: Measuring Individual Differences in Responses to the Dissolution of Parasocial Relationships', *Mass Communication and Society,* 6 (2003), 192.
[415] Cohen, p. 192.
[416] Horton and Wohl, p. 218.

You managed this *par excellence* in your writing, with its 'fourth-wall-breaking metafiction' and informal style, the feeling of intimacy only compounded by the interviews and essays where you held forth on the writer-reader relationship—you were always talking about how your writing was meant to make your reader feel 'less lonely'[417] (I found this very attractive about you, and, predictably, felt there was a sort of abstract intimacy between us).

Cory Hudson, in his provocatively titled article, 'David Foster Wallace is not your friend,'[418] says that the amount of control you wielded (and still, posthumously, wield) over describing your own writing project primes your reader to understand your work 'as a simulacrum of an intimate relationship between two people, the reader and the writer, suggesting that this relationship has the ability to transcend the pages of the text'.[419] Hudson talks about the implications this has not only for your reader but for Wallace scholarship more broadly, leading to axiomatic readings of your works; that is, in brief, us giving you too much credit for prescribing how your work should be read and understood. This troubles me as a scholar, but I don't want to be thinking about work right now—this discussion is about you and me. The truth is that, whatever evidence to the contrary, I read you in exactly the way that Hudson cautions me to avoid. Taking your interview transcripts to heart, whenever you've directly addressed your reader, and whenever a fictionalized avatar of you has appeared in your work, like in 'Good Old Neon' or *The Pale King¸* I implicitly understood this 'as a sincere gesture of empathy' by you, to me.[420]

This suggestion of intimacy was especially 'there' in your non-fiction. Lipsky said that your writing self, 'most pronounced in [your] essays—was the best friend you'd ever had, spotting everything, whispering jokes, sweeping you past what was irritating or boring or awful in humane style'.[421] You described the pieces you wrote for *Harper's Magazine* as essays in which you peeled back your skull, 'you know, welcome to my mind for twenty pages. See through my eyes'.[422] I loved living in your mind for twenty pages. In 2014, when I was rather low, I would take *Consider the Lobster* to a coffee shop and sit there, shortening days by a couple of hours, snug as a bug in your perspective. I was privy to your anxieties, your snark, your jokes, your existential dread. The inside scoop on the real David Foster Wallace. What can I say, you were the right writer for me—I was lonely and you were there, eminently lovable and charmingly human.

But I know I've been naïve. I've since learned that authenticity, or 'realism,' is a 'significant predictor of PSI,' and media figures, such as yourself, need to 'present a credible persona' to encourage your audience to keep coming back so that a relationship may evolve beyond a single

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[417] Lipsky, p. 38.
[418] Full title: 'David Foster Wallace Is Not Your Friend: The Fraudulence of Empathy in David Foster Wallace Studies and "Good Old Neon"'
[419] Hudson, p. 1.
[420] Hudson, p. 2.
[421] Lipsky, p. xx.
[422] Lipsky, p. 215.

encounter.[423] I read an old interview where you said you'd found a 'certain persona' to do the non-fiction pieces, that you'd 'hit on a tactic fairly early on of simply being candid' about what you did and didn't know, 'developing a person who was . . . kind of [a] lovable schmuck'.[424] You said your non-fiction was a rhetorical exercise in 'how to be honest with a *motive*'.[425] As a standalone sentiment that seems kind of creepy and manipulative to me, but I guess you're not the first person to have an agenda. The maddening thing is that I know your candor about your persona is itself a way of being honest with a motive. We could go around in circles for hours with this; I don't think there's a stable answer to the question of your sincerity. Like any relationship, and all matters of faith, it will simply come down to whether I trust you or not.

Horton and Wohl would describe me as a 'faithful audience,'[426] someone who 'can accept the gambit offered' (the gambit being your persona, trusting in its sincerity, even if it's with a motive). My role is 'to contribute to the illusion by believing in it, and by rewarding the persona's "sincerity" with loyalty'.[427] This is the only way the PSR survives. But would you want 'us' to survive? You had such mixed feelings about this faux-intimate relationship, despite your efforts to make me attach to you. It was much to my chagrin to read an interview transcript where you were so obviously uncomfortable with the love your readers have for you.

> [T]here's an odd phenomenon where, I think, if you write stuff that's intimate and weird, weird people tend to feel they're intimate with you. You know? Or that to have people, I got very tired of having somebody say, "I really really really really love this." Which for one *nanosecond* makes you feel good. But then you really don't know what to say else except, "Thank you." I mean, you could sense that they expected you to say something else. To fall into the rhythm of an intimacy that they felt. And of course there *wasn't* that there. And that, that was *sad* and unsettling.[428]

You said these people felt you were their friend, and that you didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings, but this feeling of intimacy was 'a delusion, and it's kind of an invasive one'.[429] That stung. Need I remind you that you once wrote Don DeLillo to say that, although you had 'no wish to violate [his] privacy,' you wanted to tell him that his work was very important to you? You said: 'I really have no other justification for writing you than to communicate this: your books . . . inform my heart and my

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[423] Giles, p. 291.

[424] David Foster Wallace, 'Interview with Michael Silverblatt', in *Bookworm,* ed. by Michael Silverblatt (California: KCRW, 1997).

[425] Lipsky, p. 215.

[426] Horton and Wohl, p. 219.

[427] Horton and Wohl, p. 220.

[428] Lipsky, p. 274.

[429] Lipsky, p. 275.

work, inspire me in the very best sense of "inspire."'[430] Huh. Why are you even surprised that people attached so strongly to you through your work? Even without this PSR stuff to hand, you still understood that this intimacy existed because of your performance. And I quote: 'But then I realize that I set it up by doing just what I did'.[431]

Whatever your feelings on the matter, shall we take a moment to just appreciate how remarkable the parasocial relationship *is*? How spectacular your persona is, to be able to 'claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of strangers'?[432] This intimacy might be a delusion, but even so, it is 'extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it'.[433] You might feel uncomfortable about this, but damn, you must feel some kind of satisfaction, too.

Let me know,
Grace

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[430] David Foster Wallace, 'Letter to Don Delillo, June 1992', (Box 101.10. Print, 1992).
[431] Lipsky, p. 275.
[432] Horton and Wohl, p. 216.
[433] Horton and Wohl, p. 216.

Dear David Foster Wallace:

Most of the research I've read on parasocial interaction has focussed on a one-to-one experience between an individual, usually a solitary TV viewer, and a media figure, but there are some more recent studies that look at the implications of co-viewing for PSI.[434] The hypothesis is that co-viewers can 'reinforce initial responses to a media figure,' thereby strengthening the parasocial relationship.[435] This is connected to the idea that 'relationships are stronger when they are intertwined in a network of other ties,' thus the social context for a PSR may be a crucial factor in the strength of this sort of relationship.[436] TV viewers (or, in this context, readers) are no longer considered to be 'solitary' figures; rather, this figure is engaged in myriad social ties, and these social ties 'are likely to exert an influence on perceptions of the PSR and its quality'.[437]

One 2006 study found that friends' opinions on the mediated relationship 'may fuel or inhibit the maintenance of PSRs'; as with interpersonal relationships, 'the extent to which the larger social circle appreciated the relationship and validated its importance was a significantly positive predictor of relational strength, an indicator of relational maintenance'.[438] Having one's relationship validated by 'the larger social network' has been proven to carry more weight for PSRs than it does for real-life friendships.[439] The influence of others is especially noticeable when there's a conflict between how the viewer (or reader) positively views the persona and other people's negative opinions. If the viewer 'is highly influenced by peers, the discussion may substantially color the person's judgments made in the next viewing episode'.[440]

Being a member of the Wallace community, and a board member for the DFW Society, and on the editorial team for *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, and having attended conferences devoted to you for the past four years, it's a safe bet to say that my peers like you. These people make up my larger social network, and their implicit validation of my love for you and your work was a source of reassurance in 2018, when there were plenty of negative opinions circulating about you. On the other hand, according to the above research, if people talk trash about you (and they do), this is also likely to bear on our relationship. I like to consider myself someone who makes up her own mind about things. But I'm also suggestible. So I bet you're wondering, what else do people say about our relationship?

Robert McLaughlin wrote on your aesthetic for a *Cambridge Companion* to your work. Bob's in an interesting position when it comes to evaluating your work; he's a former colleague and friend

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[434] Giles, p. 292.
[435] Giles, p. 292.
[436] Keren Eyal and René M. Dailey, 'Examining Relational Maintenance in Parasocial Relationships', *Mass Communication and Society,* 15 (2012), 774.
[437] Eyal and Dailey, p. 774.
[438] Eyal and Dailey, pp. 774, 75.
[439] Eyal and Dailey, p. 776.
[440] Hu, p. 220.

of yours. He was also my sponsor during my time at Illinois State University, while I was in America on my Fulbright. He was planning to retire the same year that I would be visiting ISU but was willing to sponsor me anyway. Bob still reads my work if I send it to him (he read a draft of this letter to you). He is one of the most generous people I've ever met, along with his wife, Sally, who also works at ISU. I had my first Thanksgiving in their home, a spectacularly cozy place filled with musical theatre posters, cat tchotchkes, and an unexpected amount of koala paraphernalia—Bob's a fan. Perhaps you've also been in that house, maybe sat in their living room? That'd be cool. Sometimes I wonder if there was a tension there, for Bob, as he taught and wrote on your work, since he knew you so well.

In the vein of my letters to you, Bob agrees that your work is focused on the relationship you have with your reader. He says your writing 'emphasizes the relationship established by the fiction text, the relationship between the author and the reader and the potentially dynamic, empathetic, and human connection that it makes'.[441] He mentions 'Good Old Neon' and 'Octet' as examples of stories that overtly seek this relationship. Your fiction, Bob says, functions to relieve the reader's loneliness and redeem that reader by giving her the 'opportunity to spend time experiencing the world through the consciousness of others'.[442] Your reader is not allowed to absorb this kind of fiction passively; she must, to quote you again, do 'her share of the linguistic work' for this relationship.[443] Bob says 'this work complicates and even disrupts the author-reader relationship by emphasizing the mediation through which the reader experiences the story and characters, mediation effected by the narrative voice'.[444]

Your narrative voice constantly flags the tension in your work 'between the call for sincerity and the staying power of irony, between the need for empathetic connection and the writer's practice of manipulating readers, between the desire to return to an innocent language and the inability to forget the post-structural problematization of language and representation.' These tensions, according to Bob, are central to your aesthetic, especially in your fiction.[445] Bob says the more we study your aesthetic, 'the more we see the relationship between author and reader being compared to actual human relationships'.[446] He says that in your writing and your life you saw 'the need for dynamic relationships, relationships that involve reciprocal taking and giving, that involve work, that recognize the humanness of each person, that relieve and redeem loneliness'.[447]

Amy Hungerford has a more sinister take on the end you had in mind for you reader, one where your reader's trust is open to abuse. She argues that your relationship with your reader is undermined by your manipulations, and that your intentions are not 'good' in the first place. In her

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[441] McLaughlin, p. 160.
[442] McLaughlin, p. 161.
[443] McCaffery, p. 34.
[444] McLaughlin, p. 161.
[445] McLaughlin, pp. 159-60.
[446] McLaughlin, p. 162.
[447] McLaughlin, p. 162.

chapter, 'On Not Reading DFW,' Hungerford draws a link between you and Mark Nechtr, a character in your story, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,' to claim that you wanted to fuck, and fuck over, your reader. Hungerford says that, based on what we learn from your biography, 'there was a profound connection between [your] treatment of women and [your] literary project, a connection indicated by Mark Nechtr's sense, in "Westward," that the writer sets out to fuck the reader'.[448] She asks: 'If there was something rotten in Wallace's relationships with women . . . and if those relationships shared a common dynamic with the relationship he imagined between writer and reader, might there be something rotten in the writer-reader relationship, too?'[449]

In his discussion of your 'bad influence,' Lee Konstantinou draws attention to this 'vocabulary of fucking and fucking over readers' to show how some of your critics, the ones who refuse you and resist your work, aren't simply arguing that your work has limitations. They worry that your art 'seduces readers,' and that 'even *to read* [you] (critically or not) exposes one to [your] malign charms'.[450] Konstantinou says you are 'figured as a master manipulator. The danger isn't that we might fail to read [you] correctly, but that we might read [your] dangerously seductive writing just as [you] intended it'.[451]

Doubts about your sincerity don't just come from critics who refuse to read you. Many Wallace scholars have asked similar, though perhaps less charged, questions to Hungerford's. Clare Hayes-Brady describes the process of communication in your writing as one that might be disingenuous, making the writer-reader relationship an illusion. 'Questions of sincerity and authenticity,' she writes, 'are particularly potent in the nonfiction,' in which you are constantly, and often insincerely, articulating your uncertainty about the positions of you as the author and your reader.[452] You are at pains to assure 'the reader of [your] sincerity . . . creating straw-man us-and-them binaries to establish an illusory relationship of trust, breaking the structure of the text to involve the reader as a textual co-producer and bestower of validity'.[453] But, she adds, '[s]omething of a paradox exists in this situation, in the sense that this illusory relationship is used as a proxy by which Wallace can convince us of the things he—apparently sincerely—wishes us to believe'.[454]

Lucas Thompson also looks at the processes by which your work 'routinely attempts to cajole, coerce, and finagle the reader into occupying particular emotional and interpretive positions'.[455] Although all art is in some way manipulative, Thompson argues that your fiction 'far

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[448] Amy Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 147.
[449] Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*, p. 142.
[450] Konstantinou, 'Wallace's "Bad" Influence', p. 50.
[451] Konstantinou, 'Wallace's "Bad" Influence', p. 50.
[452] Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 101.
[453] Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*, p. 101.
[454] Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*, pp. 101-02.
[455] Thompson, p. 360.

exceeds the level of artifice and narrative maneuvering that literary texts have traditionally engaged in, since [your] work regularly goes to elaborate lengths to influence the reader'.[456] Thompson asks whether your 'various [manipulative] strategies . . . ultimately constitute merely benign modes of influence?'[457] He wonders if, as readers, we tacitly consent to this manipulation when we read literary works, and if any resentment about being manipulated is misplaced, since we sign up for this.[458] Hm. Kelly talks about the difference between sincerity with intent vs. motive. Sincerity with intent is benign, but with a motive? Icky. 'This is a fraught distinction,' he says, 'and even the writer him- or herself will never know whether they have attained true sincerity, and the reader will never know either'.[459]

Oh I know I do go on, but why I'm fixated on your manipulations, even if they're benign, is because it seems an abuse of the trust you've built between us. Your sincerity is how you endear yourself to your reader, it's how you make us think there's no split between the narrator and you (especially when the narrator is a fictionalised avatar of *you*). Even if your reader can maintain that split between character and author, their identification with or attachment to a character in your work, as Rita Felski points out, 'may bleed into a felt affinity with an author'.[460] As we've seen, in trusting your self-proclaimed aims to be sincere, your readers, and some scholars, read you into your characters and into your works, particularly those works that use metafiction as a narrative tool. And because we like you, we are willing to put ourselves in whatever emotional or interpretive position you'd like, even if that position is one of great doubt.

Take, for instance, your short story 'Octet,' a misleadingly titled series of five Pop Quizzes that ask the reader to reason and make judgments (moral, logical, etc.) about several ambiguous scenarios (e.g. that one where you ask if the mother who secures a trust fund for her child by giving up custody of said child is a good mother). The quizzes devolve in the act writing of them, indicating (or so I think) that, to put it simply, shit is complicated. Of the quizzes, most scholars have paid attention to the one that closes out the piece, Pop Quiz 9, in which the narrator, 'the author,' appears to directly address the reader at the same time that the author addresses himself. This quiz, according to Kelly, best demonstrates your 'acute awareness of the co-implication of sincerity and spin' in your fiction, and 'Octet', he says, is the 'clearest working out of this bind'.[461] Konstantinou says this story asks 'that we believe in the total, genuine honesty, the "100% candor" (148) of the author—not the narrator, but the *author*, Wallace'.[462] Note how Konstantinou conflates you and the narrator? I'm sure my own interest in this quiz doesn't shock you.

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[456] Thompson, p. 360.
[457] Thompson, p. 369.
[458] Thompson, p. 369.
[459] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 140.
[460] Anderson, Felski, and Moi, p. 83.
[461] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', pp. 141-42.
[462] Konstantinou, 'No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief', p. 94. Emphasis original.

In Pop Quiz 9, '[y]ou are, unfortunately, a fiction writer,' and with 'Octet' '[y]ou are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces'.[463] (The use of second-person in this story is helpful when quoting back to you, btw and thanks.) 'How exactly the cycle's short pieces are supposed to work is hard to describe. Maybe say they're supposed to compose a certain sort of '*interrogation*' of the person reading them'.[464] 'You' go on, explaining what, as a writer of fiction, you're trying to do to the reader, how you want her to feel the same way you do about the belletristic pieces. Always self-conscious, though, that 'by no means do you want a reader to come away thinking that the cycle is just a cute formal exercise in interrogative structure and S.O.P [standard operating procedure] metatext'.[465] Which, you admit, gets complicated, because what you *want* to do in this piece is break the fourth wall, directly address the reader and puncture 'the veil of impersonality or effacement around the writer,' but you worry that this can all too easily register as the epitome of disingenuous and 'tired S.O.P. 'meta'-stuff' in which it's like 'the dramatist himself coming onstage from the wings and reminding you that what's going on is artificial and that the artificer is him . . . but that he's at least respectful enough of you as reader/audience to be honest about the fact that he's back there pulling the strings'. [466] This honesty is a kind which 'you've always had the feeling is actually a highly rhetorical sham-honesty that's designed,' you think, 'to get you to like [the dramatist] and approve of him,' and 'more than anything seems to resemble the type of real-world person who tries to manipulate you into liking him by making a big deal of how open and honest and unmanipulative he's being all the time'.[467] The kind of guy 'who's even more irritating than the sort of person who tries to manipulate you by just flat-out lying to you, since at least the latter isn't constantly congratulating himself for not doing precisely what the self-congratulation ends up doing,' which is to not talk to you but instead just perform 'in some highly self-conscious and manipulative way'.[468] 'It may be,' you conclude, 'that none of this real-narrative-honesty-v.-sham-narrative-honesty stuff can even be talked about up front'.[469]

And I suspect you're right. At least, you can't talk about this stuff in a way that definitively resolves the question of real vs. sham-honesty. 'While, on the one hand, the narrator proffers sincerity – a sincere relationship between author and reader – as a solution, on the other hand, [you] continually [problematize] the distinction between the sincere and the appearance of the sincere.'[470] Kelly says the double bind at work in 'Octet' means that, try as hard as you like, your reader is the only one who can decide if you're being manipulative or not.[471] You know this. You end Pop Quiz 9 with: 'So

[463] Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 123.
[464] Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 123.
[465] Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 124.
[466] Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 125.
[467] Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 125.
[468] Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 125.
[469] Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 125.
[470] McLaughlin, pp. 164-65.
[471] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 144.

decide'.[472] In the context of the story, this phrase is directed at 'you,' the unfortunate writer, but the decision can only ever lie with your reader. It's my choice to have faith in you.

As your reader, let me say: you do not make this choice easy. In fact, you make it harder than it might otherwise be. You're a huge pain in the ass for the manipulative way in which you preempt your reader and any criticism she may have of you. It's a strategy you've admitted to, and, of course, preemptively apologised for. When you were in conversation with Michael Silverblatt, you said that your whole apologising thing 'can very easily become trying to head off the central criticism from you by acknowledging that I can get there first and deprecate myself so that you don't get a chance to do it'.[473] You said you thought that this was 'a tic' about your own psychology, and that your work would be better without so much of the pre-emptory stuff because, you admitted, 'it really is manipulative . . . it is acting out of terror of another's judgment, and so trying to look as if he can't possibly come up with a criticism of you . . . that you haven't got there first'.[474]

This is such an intractable situation! It's impossible to even call you out on being manipulative because you've admitted you're manipulative. And the most dumbfounding thing for me is that I *like* this about you. I can never know if you're just caught in the sincerity-manipulation double bind or if you've found a way to use that bind to your advantage, or both. Just like in 'Octet,' where you address the whole meta-device thing in a way so exhaustive that I have to admit that you (yes you, I've obviously been conflating you and your narrator all this time anyway) aren't unaware of the trick you're pulling but just maybe *because* you're aware of the trick you could be seen to be pulling you are in fact not pulling that trick, you know?

Thompson writes that your decision 'to consistently flag all possible criticisms within the text is, ultimately, a shrewd attempt to defang them'. He adds that the effect of this that your reader is not allowed 'to make up her own mind about potential shortcomings and failures' of your work; '[h]ighlighting potential criticisms is, in fact, a disingenuous form of distraction, since it conceals some subtler forms of criticism that might be leveled at the book'.[475] If I'm to believe that your pre-emptive shtick is only ever about defanging criticism of your work then our so-called writer-reader relationship has no need of a reader who can *think*. You need only a reader that will *trust*. Given what I've learned, this suggestion should make my skin crawl, but I guess it depends, ultimately, on what I think about faith. Which takes us right back to the injunction at the end of Pop Quiz 9. Hayes-Brady suggests that the relationship between you and your reader is one that relies on 'a leap of faith on both sides,' if communication is to take place.[476] 'Octet' is the story where this writer-reader relationship is

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[472] Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, p. 136.
[473] Wallace, 'Interview with Michael Silverblatt'.
[474] Wallace, 'Interview with Michael Silverblatt'.
[475] Thompson, p. 368.
[476] Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*, p. 106.

most at stake. Zadie Smith, for whom you were her 'favourite living writer',[477] describes your story as 'an extremely manipulative breaking of the fourth wall, which, at the same time, claims to come from a place of urgent sincerity'.[478] She writes: 'Wallace assumes our consciousness; he parrots all our responses before we have them (he *knows* it looks manipulative, he *knows* this sounds like metafiction, and yes, *he knows we know he knows*).[479] Smith says this interrogation of your reader is a costly tactic for you and for your reader's relationship to your book, for your reader's relationship to you. She says: 'It's my guess that how you feel about "Octet" will make or break you as a reader of Wallace, because what he's really asking is for you to have faith in something he cannot possibly ever finally determine in language.'[480] '[Your] urgency, [your] sincerity, [your] apparent desperation to "connect" with [your] reader in a genuine way,' Smith says, are things that the reader will either believe in or not.[481] She continues: 'Some writers want sympathetic readers; some want readers with a sense of humor; some want their readers at the political barricades, fired up and ready to go. Strange to say it, but Wallace wanted *faithful* readers'.[482]

Smith says that '[i]t's worth having faith in "Octet"'.[483] I don't know. There are so many conflicting takes on you. In a draft of this letter to you, I sought Bob's advice. He said he found it hard to consider the sincerity issue in 'Octet' 'separate from its context,' its being a part of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, where many of the stories that surround it in this collection 'present speakers (esp. the hideous men) who are manipulating their listeners through appeals to their own supposed sincerity'.[484] He said that because of this he couldn't take the 'narrator's sincerity at face value'.[485] Bob, unlike me, has far less trouble keeping you distinct from your work. I'm sure this is helped by him knowing you in real life. I have no recourse to this sort of knowledge, and for ten years I've leaned into the habit of conflating you with your work, so I hope you can understand why I find this hard.

Bob says your 'fiction's conflation of sincere, empathetic, relationship-building narration and mock-sincere, manipulative, and dehumanizing narration might seem to undercut the aesthetic [you] articulated in [your] interviews and essays, but [he thinks] it is seminal to it.'[486] He says it's part of your ongoing struggle with the legacy of postmodernism that you're 'unwilling to pretend that postmodernism, with its attention to and critique of language, with its intertextuality and self-

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[477] Zadie Smith, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace', in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays,* (London: The Penguin Press, 2009), pp. 255-97 (p. 260).
[478] Smith, p. 287.
[479] Smith, p. 287.
[480] Smith, p. 287.
[481] Smith, p. 287.
[482] Smith, p. 287.
[483] Smith, p. 288.
[484] Personal correspondence.
[485] Personal correspondence.
[486] McLaughlin, p. 169.

referentiality, and, yes, with its irony, never happened'.[487] The reality is that postmodernism has 'made it impossible simply to return to good old-fashioned storytelling with clear narrative strategies, familiar, relatable characters, and transparent narrational style,' and your fiction seeks, a lot of the time, 'to represent postmodern irony's centrality to our culture and that centrality's deleterious effects on our relationships and our ability to be human.'[488] Bob adds that you know your reader has been 'tempered by the postmodern novel' and, like the narrator of 'Octet,' is maintaining her own distance from you; she is 'distrusting of authorial authority; wary of being manipulated into sentimental responses; aware, maybe hyperaware, of language and what it can and can't do.'[489] But should this preclude her from having faith in you?

I have met, have talked with, a lot of your readers. And I get stuck here, because they've been tempered by postmodernism, and most are hyperaware of all the above, and *still* they keep faith in you and in their relationship with you. They insist you're their friend, and that you are doing your best to be sincere. When it comes to you, there's so much cognitive dissonance. Smith's arguments for having faith in you, she admits, are 'deeply unreasonable, entirely experiential, and impossible to objectively defend.'[490] That's faith for you.

Bob told me that this letter, focussed as it is on your authorial intention to be sincere, reminded him of some things you'd talk about when you visited his classes at ISU. Having explained the themes or meanings of your stories to the students, you'd then admit that these interpretations were ones you only came up with afterwards, when you were no longer the author but a reader of your work. You said your editors would offer their interpretation of your work, and this sometimes guided your revisions to the stories; the implication of this being that you didn't really know what you meaning you wanted to convey when you started writing. Bob said to me: 'Of course, depending on what you think about his sincerity, you may or may not believe him. I came to learn that what he said was always interesting, but it wasn't always true'.[491]

Sincerely(?) yours,
Grace

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[487] McLaughlin, p. 169.
[488] McLaughlin, p. 169.
[489] McLaughlin, pp. 169-70.
[490] Smith, p. 259.
[491] Personal correspondence.

Dear David Foster Wallace:

My first trip to America was in 2016. I was going to the David Foster Wallace Conference in Normal, Illinois, but I spent a week in Austin, Texas, beforehand. I wanted to visit your archive in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin. I wasn't in a great space, mentally, on that trip, and travelling alone exacerbated this. My first day in Austin I could barely bring myself to go out and find food. I did manage to go to the Ransom Center. The first archival material I requested was your copy of Kafka's *Amerika*. I saw your name scrawled on the inside cover and felt safe.

I also requested the letters you wrote to Don DeLillo. It felt like I was seeing a private side to you, and maybe I was. In one letter, you sought DeLillo's advice. You said you'd been asked by 'some university archive' if you'd let them be the repository for your personal materials, those that 'reflect your life [?!] and work'. It was all very meta, reading that. Both your and DeLillo's archive are now housed in the Ransom Center. You said the idea of someone reading your drafts was 'not appealing,' and asked DeLillo: 'have you let somebody "handle" your "archive"? If so, why? Is it a flattering offer, or a grotesquely invasive one?' You figured the archive would only contain 'rough drafts, mss. pages, notes, etc.'[492] I imagine you didn't think your personal correspondence would end up there. But I can't say I regret reading your letters; it's the closest I ever felt to 'you'.

Grateful for this, and you,
Grace

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[492] David Foster Wallace, 'Letter to Don Delillo, January, Year Unknown'*,* (Box 148.1. Print, 1992).

Dear David Foster Wallace:

I suppose I'm writing these letters to try to save our relationship. It's not so much that I've stopped loving you. More like I'm concerned I'm going to end up a sad fan clinging to you while everything else in the world moves on, and I'll wake up years from now and regret those years I gave to you. I'm worried I have to outgrow you, when all is said and done. These letters are a last-ditch effort to see if there's still something here. When my first boyfriend and I broke up, we wrote a letter a day to each other, for two weeks. It was exhausting, but conclusive.

Lauren Berlant says that '[a] relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing'.[493] This desired thing 'might involve food,' (lol) 'or a kind of love,' or something as simple as 'a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being'.[494] This sort of optimistic attachment isn't 'inherently cruel,' but becomes cruel 'only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially'.[495] For example, I started restricting my eating because I felt out of control, but eventually I was controlled by my eating disorder. Six years on from when I asked for help, I am *still* too attached to the habits of thought and behaviour that sustain my disordered eating. I've never felt optimistic about anorexia, but that doesn't mean it isn't an instance of cruel optimism; Berlant writes that 'optimism might not feel optimistic. Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing'.[496] My optimism, as far as the eating stuff goes, feels like anxiety and competitiveness and hunger and being on the verge of tears. My optimism has ambitions to stay exactly the same, frozen in place, never weighing more, never being anything more than I am at this moment—it takes a lot of energy to remain in place (have you ever tried treading water? Can you swim? I used to do it competitively).

I'm wondering if you're an example of cruel optimism. I don't think of you the same way I think of my eating disorder. On the contrary, you're the reason I was able to move forward into a version, however fragile, of recovery. My optimism, as far as you go, feels warm and safe and sad. This kind of optimism has ambitions to be a better person, to be, cue the woodwinds, as good a person as you. I knew you weren't perfect, but I loved you for trying. 'All attachments are optimistic,' Berlant says. 'When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us'.[497] You promised me that, while there's no 'way out,' there is a way to stick around and bear things that feel unbearable. More than that, there's a way to stick around and be okay. I didn't want to be an angsty young woman

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[493] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 1.
[494] Berlant, p. 1.
[495] Berlant, pp. 1-2.
[496] Berlant, pp. 1-2.
[497] Berlant, p. 23.

in pain. I wanted to grow up and be a functioning adult—you promised me that, too, even if you couldn't deliver on such promises for yourself.

Berlant describes objects of desire as a cluster of promises because, she says, this metaphor allows us 'to encounter what's incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of our endurance in the object'.[498] Maybe now when people ask me why I'm doing my PhD on you, why I'm a fan of you at all, I should tell them it's because you promised to help me. My enduring attachment to you is about staying close to you, being in proximity to the things you promise me, returning again and again, hoping these promises are kept. Berlant points out, though, that some of these things promised are good for us 'while others, not so much'.[499] You promise me a lot of good things, but there is a cost to my attachment; to stay close to you I worry I'd implicitly be condoning behaviour I wouldn't tolerate in an actual real-life relationship. Berlant says cruel optimism is 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic'.[500] I know our relationship is fantasy, and possibly, according to some commentators, toxic. But cruel optimism is 'the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object'.[501] And since 2018, you've been my problematic fave.

I constantly forget how bad my eating disorder is for me. I think this is because my eating disorder is *easy*. It's familiar and comfortable. I'm used to having it around. The thing that's cruel about these attachments, Berlant says, the thing that makes them 'not merely inconvenient or tragic,' is that people with these attachments 'might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being'.[502] This is because, she continues, 'whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world'.[503]

I don't do well with change. It makes me anxious. Even though my impulse to restrict my food is unhealthy, for years it's how I've experienced the world. I know how it works. It's predictable. It makes me feel safe. Berlant says that we fear giving up our cruel attachments because we're worried it'll defeat our 'capacity to have any hope about anything'.[504] This seems kind of perverse, when thinking about disordered eating, but it's true. Controlling my food was the only thing that gave me stability, and it gave me (an admittedly perverse) hope that I'd be okay. I did wake up years later and regret it all.

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[498] Berlant, p. 23.
[499] Berlant, p. 24.
[500] Berlant, p. 24.
[501] Berlant, p. 24.
[502] Berlant, p. 24.
[503] Berlant, p. 24.
[504] Berlant, p. 24.

Cheers,

Grace

Dear David Foster Wallace:

Apparently the reason why people attach to other people is 'embedded in the evolutionary need for safety and security'.[505] Evidence suggests our caregiving experiences in childhood influence how we attach to others as adults, and that this 'predicts social functioning, interpersonal difficulties and mental health'.[506] I don't want to get all pop-psych about it, although I know from my time in your archive, perusing your personal library, that you have an appreciation for this stuff, so maybe this will interest you, too.

There are three traditional styles of attachment, according to attachment theory. The terms used change slightly across the literature, but the three styles are: secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent (a.k.a. anxious-ambivalent or anxious-resistant—I'm going to use anxious-ambivalent for consistency).[507] A person with a secure attachment style has positive beliefs about them and others and 'their relationships are characterized by stability, love, security and trust'.[508] People with an avoidant attachment style have negative beliefs about close relationships, and avoid romantic involvement, preferring their time alone.[509] The anxious-ambivalent style makes for a person with 'overriding anxiety about separation and abandonment, and a preoccupation with being loved by others;' these people 'desire extremely intense relationships and develop a 'clingy' relationship orientation'.[510] Tag yourself.

Humans are mixed-up creatures who defy categories like these—I know in different situations with different people I can display all three attachment styles—but categories can be helpful, and if I were to tag myself in my twenties it would be as part of the anxious-ambivalent crowd. Attachment models are mostly applied to interpersonal relationships, but of late this perspective 'has been extended to show that the relationship of the members of fan clubs of stars like Michael Jackson . . . or the felt attachment of religious people with God . . . are influenced by their attachment models'.[511] These studies suggest people 'may use their working models of attachment to think about symbolic relationships,' and symbolic attachment is the basis for theorising about parasocial relationships, like ours.[512] For some PSRs the attachment perspective is irrelevant, but for others a PSR can be intimate and 'serve attachment needs'.[513]

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[505] Katherine Berry, Sandra Bucci, and Adam N. Danquah, 'Attachment Theory and Psychosis: Current Perspectives and Future Directions', (New York : Routledge, 2020), (p. 1).
[506] Berry, Bucci, and Danquah.
[507] Berry, Bucci, and Danquah, p. 3.
[508] Jonathan Cohen, 'Parasocial Relations and Romantic Attraction: Gender and Dating Status Differences', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* 41 (1997), 517.
[509] Cohen, 'Parasocial Relations and Romantic Attraction: Gender and Dating Status Differences', p. 517.
[510] Cohen, 'Parasocial Relations and Romantic Attraction: Gender and Dating Status Differences', p. 517.
[511] Cohen, 'Parasocial Relations and Romantic Attraction: Gender and Dating Status Differences', p. 518.
[512] Cohen, 'Parasocial Relations and Romantic Attraction: Gender and Dating Status Differences', p. 518.
[513] Cohen, 'Parasocial Relations and Romantic Attraction: Gender and Dating Status Differences', p. 519.

In one study that measured both participants' attachment styles and their responses to the potential loss of a PSR with their favourite TV character, it was found that respondents with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style are 'the most intensely involved in their parasocial relationships, and . . . they are also most concerned about the break-up of these relationships'.[514] The threat of separation from these attachments can lead adults to behaviours such as 'searching, clinging, crying, protesting, anger, and approaching'.[515] Even if adults are generally 'less dependent on their attachment figures, the loss of an attachment relationship is still followed by denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance'.[516] In other words, we grieve.

Cheers,
Grace

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[514] Jonathan Cohen, 'Parasocial Break-up from Favorite Television Characters: The Role of Attachment Styles and Relationship Intensity', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships,* 21 (2004), 198.

[515] Cohen, 'Parasocial Break-up from Favorite Television Characters: The Role of Attachment Styles and Relationship Intensity', p. 190.

[516] Cohen, 'Parasocial Break-up from Favorite Television Characters: The Role of Attachment Styles and Relationship Intensity'.

Dear David Foster Wallace:

If relationships go through breakups, it follows that parasocial relationships go through parasocial breakups (PSB). PSB is 'defined as people's negative emotional reactions to termination of PSR with their liked personae,' and the patterns of these kinds of breakups are similar, emotionally etc., with breakups that happen between people in real life.[517] In one study that solicited responses about how a participant would feel if their favourite character were taken off the air, many people gave answers like: I would 'feel lonely, feel vulnerable, feel less excited about TV, feel like I lost a close friend, feel sad, miss the character, feel disappointed, feel angry . . . watch reruns . . . find a different character to love . . . try to meet the character in another way'.[518] Extreme reactions to celebrity deaths emphasise that these 'relationships have features that are very human, very warm, and very caring'.[519] When you died, I imagine many of your fans went through a kind of PSB with you, reaching out to other fans for support, starting group-reads of your work, making tributes, missing you—grieving. I was introduced to you four years later, and while your death has always been a source of sadness, I never had to deal with the acute loss. How you're remembered becomes a stand-in for you, though, and with your legacy being challenged of late, I guess I'm anticipating the loss of you in a different way.

Apparently PSB is less stressful than an interpersonal relationship breaking down, but it's also true that the stronger the PSR, the higher the level of PSB and emotional hurt that comes with saying goodbye to someone who's important.[520] Although people don't tend to rank their favourite persona as being closer to them than a friend, there's research that indicates people do consider these personae to be 'closer to themselves than acquaintances'.[521] *Yes*, the PSR is one-sided and imaginary, but my role in our relationship isn't imagined. I'm not passive at all, and the emotional potential of our relationship is real.[522] My investment in you, though unrequited, is significant. Investing in someone makes it way harder to cut them out of your life, let alone be emotionally unaffected by their absence. The level of investment in a relationship is a fairly good predictor of a person's faithfulness in and commitment to that relationship (not just as a demonstration of care and commitment, but also, like, a sunk-cost thing, where you put so much effort into something you're reluctant to throw it away unless you have to). I can't regain the time or emotional effort I've invested in you if we break up, and I hate wasting time.[523] The loss, in other words, would not be inconsequential.

[517] Hu, p. 219.
[518] Cohen, 'Parasocial Breakups: Measuring Individual Differences in Responses to the Dissolution of Parasocial Relationships', pp. 193-94.
[519] Meyrowitz (2004) qtd. in Keren Eyal and Jonathan Cohen, 'When Good Friends Say Goodbye: A Parasocial Breakup Study', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* 50 (2006), 505.
[520] Hu, p. 219.
[521] Cohen, 'Parasocial Break-up from Favorite Television Characters: The Role of Attachment Styles and Relationship Intensity', p. 199.
[522] Eyal and Cohen, p. 505.
[523] Eyal and Dailey, p. 761.

No one can make me break up with you except me. This is called, sorry to be so clinical about it, 'voluntary dissolution of PSR'.[524] Now it's me who has the power in our relationship, though I'm reluctant to wield it in any definitive way. I guess we need to have a breakup talk, for closure and all that. Let me start by saying it's not you, it's me. Although it's also you.

In a survey that addressed voluntary dissolution of PSRs, it was found that PSB can be influenced by, among other things, 'types of expectancy violations (moral, trust, and social)'.[525] Over time, two people in a relationship start to develop expectations of the other person.[526] These aren't the same as expectations at the start of a relationship, before you know each other well (e.g. expecting the other person to offer to pay for the meal); they are expectations that you have because eventually you know the other person well enough to, for the most part, predict how they'll respond to a future situation. 'Deviations from these expectations create expectancy violations,' which basically means you fail to live up to my idea of what you should do, and our relationship suffers for it.[527]

What's considered an offensive expectancy violation will vary from relationship to relationship, because, of course, different kinds of relationships are founded on different expectations.[528] A scandal, however, is a very public burning to the ground of expectations, and it is 'a common reason that people decide to discontinue their PSR with media figures'.[529] Your treatment of Mary Karr, and other women, is the kind of scandal that that's been bad for you and me. Scandals have a negative effect on relationships, interpersonal and parasocial alike, because they create uncertainty about a person's behaviour.[530] The same things that test any regular relationship will test ours; betrayal, for instance, does not augur well for the commitment between two people. Loyalty is positively related to a person's sense of certainty about who someone is and how they behave. Scandal and any perceived 'deception and betrayal increase[s] the uncertainty between people,' leading, often, to the dissolution of relationships—at the very least it poses a real obstacle to the development or maintenance of PSR.[531] As with involuntary dissolution (e.g. your favourite character no longer appearing on TV) we can reasonably expect that, should a scandal come to light, people 'with stronger PSR will experience higher levels of PSB'.[532]

But PSRs like ours are 'more replaceable than social relationships,'[533] so this thing you and I have presumably doesn't require this sort of exhaustive autopsy. I know my fixation on solving the problem of you must perplex people in my day to day life. It seems irrelevant some days, even to me.

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[524] Hu, p. 219.
[525] Hu, p. 219.
[526] Elizabeth L. Cohen, 'Expectancy Violations in Relationships with Friends and Media Figures', *Communication Research Reports,* 27 (2010), 98.
[527] Cohen, p. 99.
[528] Cohen, p. 99.
[529] Hu, p. 220.
[530] Hu, p. 220.
[531] Hu, p. 220.
[532] Hu, p. 220.
[533] Cohen, p. 100.

But I still don't want to let go. I want to make excuses for you. Apparently this isn't abnormal; 'research has discovered that individuals seek to decrease uncertainty and make attributions for media figures' behaviors much like they do for real friends'.[534] And I want to do this for you, and for me. My reluctance to break up with you is because you helped me with through an awful period in my life. I feel I owe you. Actually, I'm entirely certain my PhD has been my roundabout way of trying to repay that debt. Although this has obviously become somewhat complicated by the last few years.

Among the many things #MeToo has brought to light, it's mostly shown me how depressingly commonplace your behaviour is, in the world of powerful men. With this in mind, if you're feeling like you're under a spotlight unfairly, let me tell you why, with you, this moral violation feels especially egregious. In her study on expectancy violations with media figures, Elizabeth Cohen says we 'may have different reactions to the same expectancy violation committed by different types of media figures because [we] have unique expectations for the roles that different celebrities should perform'.[535] For example, in Australia we take the moral conduct of professional athletes terribly seriously. If an athlete takes drugs, or sexually harasses someone, there's a media shitstorm. Cohen suggests that '[p]erhaps moral violations committed by famous athletes [seem] particularly reprehensible because they are often positioned as role models to children and adults alike'.[536] This, I feel, applies to my expectations of you.

At some point in your career you shifted from the Romantic-creative-genius-Byronic-hero type, into something closer to what, posthumously, we labelled 'Saint Dave'. Probably the most intense version of this can be found in your Kenyon College commencement address, later published as *This is Water*. You were always so self-deprecating about being called 'wise,' so self-conscious about sounding 'a little pious'.[537] But your work, especially the later stuff, like your commencement address, was saturated with morality. I remember listening to *This is Water* so often I could recite it by heart. Back in 2014, I needed to listen to you every day, needed you to tell me 'how to keep from going through [my] comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to [my] head'.[538] I needed you to tell me to think about other people than myself, and to be generous to those people. I wanted to believe that if I could do this, daily life would feel better, that I would get better. I wanted to be reassured that being less selfish is hard, that '[i]t takes will and effort,' and I wanted to know that you, of all people, found it hard too. My favourite thing you said in that speech: 'if you are like me, some days you won't be able to do it, or you just flat out won't want to'.[539]

This was one of your great rhetorical moves. To avoid coming off preachy you made sure to never exempt yourself from being preached at, too. In *This is Water*, you repeat that we needn't

[534] Cohen, p. 100.
[535] Cohen, p. 101.
[536] Cohen, p. 107.
[537] Lipsky, p. 292.
[538] David Foster Wallace, 'This Is Water (Full Transcript and Audio)', (Farnam Street, 2005).
[539] Wallace, 'This Is Water (Full Transcript and Audio)'.

worry, shouldn't think, that you're giving us 'moral advice,' or that you're going to lecture us 'about compassion or other-directedness or all the so-called virtues'.[540] You're just some guy, like us, trying to be a decent person. And you did seem intent on trying to be decent, on trying to be a good adult and a good citizen. I found this aspect of your writing, of you, so attractive. Your preoccupation became my preoccupation (I spent four years of my PhD writing about this exact feature of your work) and though I would've never called you my role model, or my hero, or anything like that, I did look to you for guidance. That speech repeatedly blew my mind.

This is Water was a concentrated dose of a moral strain in your work that we can trace back as early as 1990, with 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.' In your essay you called for writers to abandon irony and 'endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles,' to 'treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction,' to 'risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness,' etc. In other words, to say what we mean. That essay became the lynchpin of what scholars deemed your New Sincerity. This belief in your sincerity was, and is, crucial to being able to digest a speech like *This is Water*, or a novel like *The Pale King*. Do you see how all this connects?

David Foster Wallace, despite your (sincere?) protestations, you positioned yourself as a moral guide for your readers and so the reality is this: we expect you to practice what you preach. When you fail to live up to our expectations, we, *I*, feel betrayed. And when you're not only a celebrity, but a saint, it's a greater fall from grace. It's so banal to have an idol not live up to your expectations. And the irony is that you of all people would have understood why something that banal could be so entirely untrivial.

Cheers,
Grace

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540 Wallace, 'This Is Water (Full Transcript and Audio)'.

Dear David Foster Wallace:

By my letters, especially my latest, you'll be aware that there've been some major expectancy violations in our relationship. I feel there's been a moral violation, your abusive behaviour, and a violation of trust, implicit in the question of your sincerity and your manipulation of your reader (me). You're lucky (if you even care?) that I'm as committed to you as I am; 'commitment leads to accommodating behaviors such as derogating alternatives or making sacrifices for the relational partner to preserve the relationship'.[541] But can I compromise my morals and my sense of self-worth in order to accommodate these violations?

There's research that suggests the more committed I am to our relationship, the more hurt I am by these violations ("love more, hurt more" is the phrase).[542] But 'love more, forgive more' might be an equally forceful possibility.[543] Research regarding how people react to betrayal in a close relationship shows 'that commitment facilitates forgiveness of betrayal'.[544] This effect is mediated by how a person interprets the perceived betrayal—was it done on purpose, or was it accidental?[545] As regards both the above violations, I think, arguably, both are accidental. I have no role in your relationship with other women, and you were not thinking of me, specifically, when writing to your reader. And yet I still feel that an injustice of a sort has taken place! I guess I feel that way because an injustice did take place, with Karr, even if it didn't directly affect me.

Although it did make me feel very uncomfortable. That being said, my discomfort was not about your behaviour, but about my lack of discomfort about your behaviour. As I've said, the abuse was not news to me. It wasn't even that, when I read your biography back in 2012, I'd already wrestled with it and reconciled it in my mind. It was more that I hadn't given it a second thought (like, what the fuck? Bad feminist!). My discomfort in 2018 was also about the climate in which these kinds of witch-hunts were taking place—right at the height of #MeToo, which I support, and cancel culture, which I find more dubious. People were foaming at the mouth to bring judgment down upon 'bad men', and while I agreed, in a general and lazy way, that these 'bad men' should be held to account, I didn't like the way justice was being done. My main concern was that *you* should not be cancelled, should not be thrown on the trash heap, should not be disowned by your faithful readers. This didn't happen, not in any really permanent way (as was the case for many of these 'bad men'). But then *that* made me uncomfortable. What lesson should I take from this, that I lived in a world where, firstly, you could be cancelled because public opinion on Twitter said so, but secondly, that you couldn't be cancelled even when public opinion on Twitter said so?

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[541] Eyal and Dailey, p. 764.
[542] Hu, p. 227.
[543] Hu, p. 227.
[544] Hu, p. 227.
[545] Hu, p. 227.

It has always been my impulse to research my way out of problems. I had an agenda of course: to prove your innocence. Not, like, prove that you weren't abusive or whatever, but to prove that the society that condemned you was guilty of something, too. Guilt shared is guilt halved? I don't know. That might've been what I was hoping for. But in order to share the culpability around, I had to confront it all. The years I'd successfully spent passively avoiding feminism or questioning my attachment to you were over. The more I read, the more I felt myself changing, which I was nervous but also kind of relieved about. But you've been frozen in time since 2008. What people say about you has changed, but you cannot. And this makes me sad.

Horton and Wohl say that the intensification of PSRs over time is 'a kind of growth without development, for the one-sided nature of the connection precludes a progressive and mutual reformulation of its values and aims'.[546] Sometimes real-life relationships suffer this fate, too. One person grows, the other doesn't, they grow apart, they break up. One study showed that the duration of a PSR 'negatively predicted the strength of the relationship'.[547] The implication is that, over time, a ceiling is reached in these relationships—progress can't go any further.[548]

I have one more letter to write.

Cheers,
Grace

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[546] Horton and Wohl, pp. 216-17.
[547] Eyal and Dailey, p. 776.
[548] Eyal and Dailey, p. 776.

Dear David Foster Wallace:

In one of your interviews, you claimed that: 'Interesting and true stuff in my life seems to involve double-binds, where there is a decision between two alternatives, but neither is acceptable'.[549] It's been an exhausting process, but I've concluded that when it comes to you I'm in a double bind. My willingness to stay in this relationship, or my inability to let go, however, is not solely a matter to do with you. Do you remember, in an earlier letter, I wrote about how parasocial relationships aren't a sign of dysfunction and how they're not substitutions for a social life? I've been so fixated on talking about us and what I've gained from our relationship that I've neglected to talk about all the other readers who have their own relationships with you, and how these people, a lot of them anyway, are my friends—in real life.

You might feel squeamish at the idea of a Wallace community, but it exists and I adore it. My love for you is inseparable from my love of this community. In trying to save our relationship I guess I've also been trying to save the relationship I have to this community. I know these good, generous, genuine people because of you, and I'll forever be grateful to you for bringing me to them. I won't make you uncomfortable by going into exhaustive detail about your community (although, if you're interested, please see my essay: 'What it's like in David-Foster-Wallace-Land') but I hope that you take some comfort in knowing it exists. Your legacy is complicated, but a lot of good came out of it. I hope that's enough. I think it's enough.

According to everyone, you would answer every letter you received. It's probably good you can't answer my letters; it's forced me to do some hard work by myself. And I've learned a lot from this, just like I learned a lot from you. For what it's worth, you are one of the biggest reasons I am who I am. I have nothing left to say except thank you.

Sincerely yours,
Grace

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[549] Wallace qtd. in Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction ', p. 138.

What it's like in David-Foster-Wallace-Land

In April 1996, something called wallace-l popped up online. A plain, text-only site, with a basic sign-up form to subscribe to a list. This was pre-Google. The list was not something you stumbled across. You had to seek it out. Fans of David Foster Wallace would. [550]

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Michael G.
Mon Jan 13 01:52:07 UTC 2020

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I found this place and knocked on the door and was welcomed in.
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Wallace-l is one of two early David Foster Wallace fan communities. The listserv (which functions like a primitive chat room—the equivalent of a reply-all email) had its genesis on another listserv dedicated to Thomas Pynchon: pynchon-l. [551] If you're familiar with Wallace and Pynchon, it may not surprise you that there's crossover in fan base. In March 1996, the Wallace-heads on pynchon-l were, evidently, gabbing too much about the recently published *Infinite Jest*, and the hardcore Pynchon folks were fed up with discussions getting off-topic. [552]

> From: MASCARO@[omitted]
> Date: 19 Mar 1996 17:53 -0800
> Subject: curmudgeonly
> Since most of my posts seem to be getting clogged in some dead gopher bum, I'm
> sure no one will read this little note, but I do need to say it. For the past week or more
> IJ [*Infinite Jest*] has been occupying the vast bulk of this list's imaginative
> meanderings, so why don't one of you just go start a DFW list? Is there one?
> john m[553]

It was Pynchon or get out. And so we did.

○

Wallace became properly famous around the same time that the internet was ramping up; he is 'one of the first major literary figures to live and die in the age of the internet and social media'. [554] The web

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[550] Matt Bucher, 'Fantods: David Foster Wallace, Wallace-L, and Literary Fandom Online', (2009).
[551] Robert W. Short, 'Big Books: Addiction and Recovery in the Novels of David Foster Wallace', (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), (p. 171).
[552] Bucher.
[553] Short, p. 171.
[554] E. Jackson, X. M. del Pont, and T. Venezia, 'Introduction - Supposedly Fun Things: A David Foster Wallace Special Issue', *Orbit (Cambridge),* 5 (2017), 6.

has been a double-edged sword for Wallace, keeping his legacy alive long enough to see the tables turn on both him and his fans. The internet in general had a transformative effect on fandom everywhere, with fans adopting and adapting to it early on,[555] 'participating in multi-user dungeons and bulletin boards, then constructing home pages and 'shrines' full of pictures of celebrities, creating web rings, forums, news groups, blogs, wikis and fan club pages'.[556] Where they'd previously interacted in offline spaces, at conventions or conferences, or through fanzines and pen pal activity, online interaction 'turned the fan community from a network of local cultures or periodic rituals into a non-stop process of social effervescence'.[557]

○

Joseph S.
Mon Apr 21 16:19:52 CDT 2014

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This list is one of the best I have been on. The comments and
critiques are terrific, intelligent, and well-written. Additionally,
though there are some disagreements about this or that, which is to be
expected and encouraged, it really feels like a positive community.
I'm also on the Pynchon list, and while there are a number of really,
really smart, interesting individuals on that list, there is a lot of
fighting (flaming?), which is just not what I look for in a list like
this. I get enough nasty critiques at my day job (criticism is the
language of science). so wallace-l is a nice change from most of the
nastiness on the web (read: any comment section anywhere).
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mike
Mon Apr 21 19:26:18 CDT 2014

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The list was a great Magic Bus, with the occasional brawl. It was
another form of mania.
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○

Fandom is a participatory culture, one that has low barriers to engagement (both artistically and civically) and creates 'sites of informal learning'.[558] As one member of wallace-l put it: 'a place where the intellectual bar was set high, but which was not strictly academic or exclusive, especially as a regards to any barrier for entry'.[559] Members of a fandom receive strong support, whether for creating and sharing their creations with others, or as informal mentorship, where long-time fans share their knowledge with novices. Fandoms are spaces where members feel their contributions matter, and

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[555] Rhiannon Bury, 'Technology, Fandom and Community in the Second Media Age', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies,* 23 (2017), 628.
[556] Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 236.
[557] Matt Hills qtd. in Duffett, p. 239.
[558] Henry Jenkins, 'Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture', in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom,* ed. by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (Milton: Routledge, 2017), pp. 13-27 (p. 18).
[559] Lisa Diamond, 'Re: Question/S for the Wallace Community', *wallace-l,* (2020).

where they 'feel some degree of social connection with one another'.[560] This kind of participatory culture 'predates the digital,' but digital networks have totally transformed the way these cultures are able to operate, 'allowing people who might not encounter each other otherwise to have meaningful exchanges and creating a context where forms of expression flow quickly and broadly, both within and between social networks'.[561]

Participatory fandom 'has always been premised on making connections and building community with people with similar specific fannish interests, most of whom one does not already know. It is the media text that binds, not prior relations'.[562] The digital, however, ramps up this power. This is the case for Wallace fans who are sprinkled across the globe today, and it was especially the case for fans back in 1996 when *Infinite Jest* was published and, being a difficult-to-approach book, at 1,079 pages incl. dense endnotes, these would-be fans didn't know where to turn and who to talk to about what the heck even happened by the book's end.

> My first post to wallace-l . . . is dated 6th July 2001. I had finished *Infinite Jest* only the week before, and spent the following days obsessively trolling the Internet for clues to the mysteries that remained. wallace-l was quite obviously home to a ton of devoted, knowledgeable Wallace fans, and I hoped that, through these sages, I would be able to unlock the novel's secrets without having to read and study it more closely. Which didn't happen at all! Instead I wound up studying the novel for years on end, and having the time of my life.[563]

Wallace brought (and still brings) together complete strangers to talk about their shared love of and frustration with his novel. The listserv has seen traffic for 24+ years, with discussion ranging from *Infinite Jest* to book recommendations, bemoaning or outright arguing about presidential elections, mourning the passing of long-time list-members and, of course, grieving Wallace when he died in 2008.

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Maria B.
Fri Jan 10 00:51:31 UTC 2020

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[M]ade many IRL wallace-l friends. Some whom I consider more like
family. And we experienced the blow of his death together, here. So
grateful for wallace-l then, for everyone who understood. Terrible
days.
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[560] Jenkins, 'Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture', p. 18.
[561] Jenkins, 'Fandom, Negotiation, and Participatory Culture', p. 18.
[562] Bury, p. 635.
[563] Maria Bustillos, 'The Wonder of Wallace-L'*, (2009).

Brian C.
Sat Jan 11 02:30:55 UTC 2020

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This list was literally important that day [12 September 2008] and the
days to come for many of us, a comfort, a place on email to cry
together.
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Richard S.
Sun Jan 12 21:44:50 UTC 2020

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For me, too, the days after Wallace died were a crystallization of
what I always felt about this list: it is a real community (when there
is no objective reason for the listers to care about each other) where
I belong (even though I did nothing to deserve that).
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<p style="text-align:center">◯</p>

Allow me to pummel you with some stats and dates. As at November 2, 2009, wallace-l had 758 members, with total posts (since its inception on April 26, 1996) numbering 57,230. An update in April 2016, around the twentieth anniversary of wallace-l, counted things at over 77,000 emails and 1400+ subscribers.[564] In the busiest month across this time period (January 2004) there were 1678 posts, which equates to a post every half hour for 31 days. On average, there were 351.1 posts each month. April 10, 2000, saw the first major online group re-read of *Infinite Jest*. This was followed in June 2004, with a group read of Wallace's short story collection *Oblivion*. Then again, in May 2005, another re-read of *Infinite Jest*.[565] In June 2009, the 'Infinite Summer' project began.[566] This read-through of *Infinite Jest* attracted national media attention and some high-profile participants (e.g. author John Green).[567] More dates, more stats, and so on, etcetera.[568]

<p style="text-align:center">◯</p>

And now, a radically condensed history of the rest of Wallace fandom. The second pillar of the early online Wallace community is The Howling Fantods. This fansite came into being in March 1997. Nick Maniatis, the site owner, maintained a Geocities home page where, in a section about his interests, he listed Wallace.[569] When he searched online for links to flesh out this section, he

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[564] Matt Bucher, 'Twenty Years of Wallace-L', (2016).

[565] Bucher, 'Fantods: David Foster Wallace, Wallace-L, and Literary Fandom Online'.

[566] Beyond being a group read of Wallace's novel, Matt Bucher commented that 'Infinite Summer,' which took shortly after Wallace's death, was also 'a type of public memorial, a shared lengthy funeral, and a group hug. It was begun very deliberately as a type of mourning'. Members of wallace-l had been able to go through this mourning already on the listserv, but many guides and participants in 'Infinite Summer' had not.

[567] Bucher, 'Fantods: David Foster Wallace, Wallace-L, and Literary Fandom Online'.

[568] Thank you to Rob Short and Matt Bucher for gathering these stats. Made available at: http://www.mattbucher.com/2009/11/24/fantods/

[569] Ashley Crawford, 'David Foster Wallace: Pale Kingdoms: An Interview with Nick Maniatis, Founder of the Pre-Eminent David Foster Wallace Website, the Howling Fantods.', (n.d.) <http://www.21cmagazine.com/David-Foster-Wallace-Pale-Kingdoms> [accessed 2/20/2020]. It's worth mentioning that when these early fan sites came on board, it was very much Web 1.0 and you couldn't do much except look at them. As Matt Bucher pointed out to me, wallace-l was really the first place you could talk to

discovered two other (now inactive and/or archived) Wallace sites.[570] Nick said: 'My competitiveness took over and I tried to compile more content than what was available elsewhere. I'm still going strong today.'[571] The Geocities page went from a personal website to a site about Wallace.[572] Although it sees less activity these days, the Howling Fantods is still a hub for all things Wallace—scholarly publications, dissertations, links to any Wallace-related news, digitised archival material, memorials, pop-culture references to Wallace, fan creative works, conference CFPs, etc. It is a treasure trove for fans and scholars alike.[573]

The offline community for Wallace fandom, most visible at academic conferences organised in his name, is as strong as its online counterparts. For a group of people who live across something like 23+ countries—and for those with the means to travel and meet other fans IRL—the online community is a complement to offline hangs. My introduction to the Wallace community was offline at the 2016 David Foster Wallace conference held in Normal, Illinois. There've been upwards of 16 conferences and symposia about Wallace, held around the globe in the US, the UK, Europe, and Australia—and that's not an exhaustive list. That's enough scholarly activity to earn us our own field of research: Wallace Studies.[574] We now have an academic journal as an outlet for some of this activity: *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*. Somewhere between and across these on- and offline worlds we have the DFW Society. Both the Society and the journal are labours of love, subscribed to by fans and scholars alike, and sustained by volunteer efforts.

Adam Kelly provides a comprehensive summary of the birth and growth of Wallace Studies as a discipline. This emergence is tied to David Foster Wallace's death in 2008, after which readers, fans and critics mobilised to 'revisit his work, and to begin to consider Wallace's legacy for U.S. and world literature'.[575] Wallace's work had been given critical attention since he first published, but the explosion of scholarship that was being produced three decades on (and continues apace) led to what we now call 'Wallace Studies', a discipline that comprises 'the network of interest in David Foster Wallace's oeuvre that ranges through but also well beyond the traditional academic channels'.[576] And indeed there is frequent and productive and inclusive interaction between fans and scholars that makes Wallace fandom a curious community.

This community has grown and changed over time. As of 2020, both on- and offline communities have undergone a kind of migration. Offline, the major recurring conference for

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other people and ask them questions about *Infinite Jest*. Nick did add forums to the Howling Fantods in 1998 or so, but these got overrun with spam and he shut them down.

[570] Crawford. (These other two websites are Bob Wake's Infinite Jest: Reviews, Articles, & Miscellany and a Wallace page by Andrew Sandley—now only available via The Wayback Machine if'n you're interested.)

[571] Crawford.

[572] Duncan Driver, 'The Natural Noise of Good', (2011) <http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/interviews/the-natural-noise-of-good.html> [accessed 2/20/2020].

[573] Bucher, 'Fantods: David Foster Wallace, Wallace-L, and Literary Fandom Online'.

[574] For a bibliography of Wallace criticism see: https://davidfosterwallaceresearch.wordpress.com/

[575] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline', p. 47.

[576] Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline', p. 47.

Wallace, held in Normal, Illinois, seems to have run its course. In 2020, the big Wallace event was going to be held in Austin, Texas, where attendees would've had access to the David Foster Wallace Archive housed in the Harry Ransom Center (HRC). There were also going to be events open to the public, including a keynote address by author Jennifer Egan. Thanks to COVID-19, DFW2020 was postponed, but the event was (and will be, when it eventually happens in 2022) an intentional and concerted effort on the part of the DFW Society to grow interest in Wallace Studies and open it up to a larger audience. Online, where for 2020 we've all kind of been relegated, we still have wallace-l but most of the chatter has moved to Twitter (and, to a lesser degree, Facebook and Instagram). Something is gained and lost with this migration. The sense of online community is, by some accounts, diminished, even as people become more visible. According to one fandom study, the appeal of Twitter is 'the sense of immediacy, presence albeit a virtual one, and connection'.[577] The connection on something like Twitter, though, takes a different form to that of a listserv. Use of hashtags and re-tweets allows people to feel like they're part of a large group, it gives users a 'sense of ambient affiliation,' but requires no direct interaction or discussion with other individuals.[578]

Prabhakar R.
Mon Jan 13 00:00:36 UTC 2020

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I'm on the fringes of DFW Twitter, and the conversations I glimpse are
not as deep or revelatory as what I remember from the list. Twitter is
more slight and ephemeral. But we see each other, if not every day,
then every few days or weeks. It's part of why I hang on at what is
essentially a hellsite now.
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This reflects findings that although Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr afford 'a number of fannish pleasures,'[579] it's really the architecture of the listserv, including the searchable archive, that enables longer-term collective memory and community formation—there's even data that suggest a platform like Facebook 'may actually disable community formation'.[580] But on the other hand, community change can also welcome in people that were previously excluded. Social media 'can serve as an entry point for younger fans to fan communities established on older platforms'.[581]

Lucca L.
Tue Jan 14 03:52:55 UTC 2020

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Super new to Wallace fandom myself . . . It was through the magical
power of hashtags that I found a DFW fan on Instagram, who turned me
on to the podcast and Matt B and Dave L. I was stoked to join the
list-serve and now I'm fully FOMO'd after reading the great
experiences y'all have had because of it in previous years . . . For
me: The wallace-l feels brilliant and warm and friendly. Wallace
Twitter is smart yet obviously more guarded.
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[577] Bury, p. 637.
[578] Bury, p. 637.
[579] Bury, p. 627.
[580] Bury, p. 639.
[581] Bury, p. 640.

And there's good reason to be guarded on what is essentially a hellsite now. An obvious but significant flipside to a fan community going more public is that being more visible online makes you more visible online.[582] And while new fans find you, so do the haters. Going public means that everything you do, everything you 'are' is up for grabs and open to distortion.

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Like any traditional moral tale, we are in need of a villain. Ours is the 'antifan'. Within fan studies, the antifan calls attention to how 'interactions with producers, and fans' relationships with texts, are not solely positive'.[583] Antifandom is 'the realm . . . of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel'.[584] Although there's nuance to antifandom and the motivations that underlie it, if you have any point of reference to antifandom perhaps you are most familiar with its dark underbelly, epitomised by something like #Gamergate.[585]

Back in 2014 Gamergate 'began as a critique of ethics in games journalism',[586] but developed into an attack on female gamers, fuelled by the belief that 'videogames were being overrun by feminists and social justice warriors, and that (white, male) gamers were maligned victims'.[587] It started with Zoe Quinn, a video-game developer who released her interactive fiction game, Depression Quest, in 2013. Depression Quest functions as a kind of empathy game 'that deals with living with depression in a very literal way'.[588] The game designers say the goal of Depression Quest is twofold: to experience, as much as is possible with this simulation, what it's like to have depression, and to make other sufferers of depression feel unalone and comforted. You can donate an amount of your choosing (including donating nothing) to play Depression Quest online. (Sidenote for Wallace fans: the game description page is headed by a quote from Wallace's short story 'The Depressed Person'.)

Why Quinn became the target of Gamergate is slippery and depends on who you ask. An early criticism was that a 'gloomy' game like Depression Quest had no place on Steam, a digital store

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[582] It can also cause a collision, or collapsing, of multiple personal worlds into one. On Twitter you might have colleagues, family, friends, neighbours, academics, etc., all following you and not being the target audience for your DFW-related tweets, whereas on wallace-l you were guaranteed that everyone on the listserv was there for a very specific and common reason: to talk about Wallace.

[583] Bethan Jones, '#Askeljames, Ghostbusters, and #Gamergate: Digital Dislike and Damage Control', in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies,* ed. by Paul Booth (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), pp. 415-31 (p. 415).

[584] Jonathan Gray (2003) qtd. in Jones, p. 415.

[585] Jones, p. 422.

[586] Jones, p. 416.

[587] Jones, p. 424.

[588] Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, and Isaac Schankler, 'Depression Quest: An Interactive (Non)Fiction About Living with Depression'*,* (n.d.).

for PC games.[589] The release of Quinn's game also coincided with news of Robin Williams's suicide, and there were claims that this was 'an attempt to capitalise on Williams's death—despite the fact that the game's only source of revenue is donations'.[590] Things escalated when Quinn's ex-boyfriend ranted online, alleging that Quinn had slept with a journalist in exchange for favourable coverage of her game. The journalist, Nathan Grayson, clarified that he had not reviewed the game and had only reported that it existed.[591] Still, Quinn's sex life came under review. All 'in the name of ethics'.[592]

If Twitter had a D&D alignment I think it'd be chaotic neutral. As a tool, it enables individual freedom of expression without (supposedly) preference for good or evil—considerations of these are irrelevant.[593] A character in D&D with this alignment is extremely difficult to deal with. Ditto Twitter. On this platform, something like #Gamergate can be given as much oxygen as #MeToo. And being a platform that, as above, affords an 'ambient affiliation' with a larger group (members of which you may never meet, let alone know their real name), the architecture of Twitter and other social media can make people feel powerful from behind their screens. Whatever your bugbear, online you will find a community that supports your views and expresses your values, and you will feel like you belong and that the thing you like is the thing that is good. This can be an empowering thing, but it all depends on the kinds of views you'd like to see empowered.

The debate around Quinn, journalistic ethics and coverage of video games played out over Twitter, and the hashtag #gamergate gained traction. Forums including Reddit and 4chan were also used as outlets for toxic opinions. In September 2014, an anonymous poster to 4chan wrote: 'Next time she shows up at a conference we . . . give her a crippling injury that's never going to fully heal . . . a good solid injury to the knees. I'd say a brain damage, but we don't want to make it so she ends up too retarded to fear us'.[594] Rape and death threats were made. Quinn was doxed (slang for 'document tracing'—her personal details were made public online, with the implied invitation to harass her).[595] For her safety, Quinn left her home and stayed with friends, working with the authorities to find the anonymous attackers.[596] As Simon Parkin points out in his article for *The New Yorker*, 'the fact that *she* [Quinn] was the subject of the attacks rather than the friend who wrote about her game

[589] Simon Parkin, 'Zoe Quinn's Depression Quest', *The New Yorker,* (2014) <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/zoe-quinns-depression-quest> [accessed 2/2/2020].
[590] Parkin.
[591] Parkin.
[592] Parkin.
[593] Although when users get involved that gets murky. The Twitter 'Values' page claims that the service is meant to be harnessed 'for good,' but as a tool for other people to use it has no such guaranteed orientation, and the platform's moderation isn't always in line with their values. Anecdotally, there's an argument to be made that Twitter is, in fact, lawful evil—abstaining from banning white nationalism on its platform, despite its policy on hateful conduct (see, for example: Joseph Cox, 'Twitter and Youtube Won't Commit to Ban White Nationalism after Facebook Makes Policy Switch', *Vice,* (2019) <https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mbzz8x/twitter-youtube-wont-ban-white-nationalism-facebook>.)
[594] Anonymous qtd. in Parkin.
[595] Parkin.
[596] Parkin.

reveals the true nature of much of the criticism: a pretense to make further harassment of women in the industry permissible'.[597] Other prominent targets of Gamergate included game developer Brianna Wu and Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic who'd released the YouTube series: *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. Both received death and rape threats.

Gamergate is an example where antifandom crashes into 'wider discourses of misogyny and hate online'.[598] But there's more going on with antifandom than pure vitriol. Antifandom is nuanced, and antifans' motivations are varied. Moreover, unlike a non-fan who doesn't engage with the fan text or object, antifans have more in common with fans than they'd let on. In his work on antifandom and moral texts, Jonathan Gray writes that 'hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and "effects" or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture'.[599] Discussing hate and dislike, then, becomes important to studies of fandom—it helps us understand not only 'how citizens make sense of the media's role in their everyday lives, and what they want from media,' but also sheds light on what and who is 'hidden from cultural studies' account of media use when we do not adequately discuss dislike'.[600]

Antifans are not the easy villain I'm tempted, by my own fannish defensiveness, to make them out to be. In their study of media dislike, Jonathan Gray and Sarah Murray look closer at the moral economy of fandom, in which 'liking [is] good, disliking bad'.[601] This privileging of the good, loving sides to fandom was initially a 'rhetorically defensive position' for media and cultural studies scholars wanting to redeem the figure of the fan from its early pathologising.[602] Fandom, with its adoring and active audiences, was often seen as progressive, a space for marginalised people to resist their subjugation. 'Love and liking,' according to Gray and Murray, 'were habitually framed as politically positive and agential, as resisting class, gender and/or race chauvinisms that called for disdain and disapproval, and that aimed to subjugate marginalized groups yet more. Love aimed to pluck regressive politics out of the textual world as one might extract a splinter from one's thumb'.[603]

This moral economy was useful in getting a research discipline on its feet,[604] but such clear-cut love of love is disturbed by antifandom, itself often a 'result of moral or ethical issues the antifan

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[597] Parkin.

[598] Jones, p. 424.

[599] Jonathan Gray, 'Antifandom and the Moral Text:Television without Pity and Textual Dislike', *American Behavioral Scientist,* 48 (2005), 841.

[600] Jonathan Gray and Sarah Murray, 'Hidden: Studying Media Dislike and Its Meaning', *International Journal of Cultural Studies,* 19 (2016), 358.

[601] Gray and Murray, p. 358.

[602] Gray and Murray, p. 358.

[603] Gray and Murray, p. 359.

[604] Gray and Murray, p. 359.

has with the text or fan object'.[605] Fandom, historically (though not exclusively) celebrated for its 'progressive potential,'[606] is under scrutiny.

> If fans are rebellious and subversive and challenge social power, we must ask, which kinds? What does fandom challenge, and what social systems might it leave intact or even support? Early research identified fandom as open to anyone, but was it? How did this utopian story condition how we have made sense of fans ever since, and with what consequences? . . . Is it possible we got a narrative of "fandom is progressive" because the particular academics who founded fan studies were themselves progressive—they chose those texts, joined those communities, and that was what was available for them to see? From another direction, to what extent was the narrative that fandom was open and inclusive because the people who set the stage were precisely the educated, middle-class, liberal white people fandom was open to? What has fan studies missed starting where it did, and what can we see if we use the tools of fan studies without a belief in fundamental progressiveness and good faith?[607]

As a person to whom fandom is readily open—being educated, middle-class, and white—and as a fan who wants to celebrate the inclusive vibe she gets from her chosen fandom, I need to think harder about these questions.

The progressive aura of fandom might be largely attributed to the idea of 'transformational fans'. Transformational fans 'tend to twist and reimagine the text in non-sanctioned ways though creative work, asserting a kind of moral ownership over the text'.[608] In fan studies, 'transformational fans—typically imagined as largely female, queer, and/or people of color who feel underserved by the media—tend to be celebrated'.[609] The flipside to this, and what runs somewhat counter to the idea of fandom's progressiveness, is the 'affirmational fan'. These fans, 'are imagined (albeit sometimes reductively) to be overwhelmingly straight, white, middle-class and male, catered to well enough by media culture that they don't need to change that culture'.[610] Like with most binaries, these categories only get us so far. But they help contextualise both the potential progressiveness of fandom, through transformational fans, and the potential regression latent in affirmational fans. Fandom might present itself as a site of inclusion (and it's true that these communities offer a sense of belonging) but it's worth remembering that these same communities are also 'sites of hierarchy and exclusion'.[611] Racial hierarchies, for example, are highlighted by the whiteness of a fan community,[612] and this is something the Wallace community has had to confront in recent years.

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[605] Jones, p. 416.

[606] Henry Jenkins (1992) qtd. in Mel Stanfill, 'Introduction: The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary', *Television & New Media,* 21 (2020), 126.

[607] Stanfill, p. 126.

[608] A. Navar-Gill, 'Fandom as Symbolic Patronage: Expanding Understanding of Fan Relationships with Industry through the Veronica Mars Kickstarter Campaign', *Popular Communication,* 16 (2018), 212.

[609] Navar-Gill, p. 212.

[610] Gray and Murray, p. 361.

[611] Jonathan Dean, 'Politicising Fandom', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations,* 19 (2017), 414.

[612] Dean, p. 414.

If affirmational and transformative fans exist within their community on their own internal spectrum of marginalisation, we can think of the antifan, then, as being further marginalised than transformational fans, placing them even further down on this spectrum. Transformational fans 'still have something to work with, after all . . . Some who hate or dislike the text, by contrast, may feel so utterly alienated or turned off that it is not even worth their effort to 'participate': they are simply excluded'.[613] When we pay attention to what an antifan dislikes about the fan object or community, we get an indication of what is inaccessible to that antifan.[614] '[D]escribing what is hated . . . also highlights what is hidden' for an antifan.[615]

Here is a representative example related to the Wallace community. When the DFW Society was launched in January 2017, the organisation's mission statement was shared on Twitter.

> The International David Foster Wallace Society was founded to promote and sustain the long-term scholarly and independent study of David Foster Wallace's writing. To these ends, the Society welcomes *diverse*, peer-reviewed scholarship and seeks to expand the critical boundaries of Wallace studies.[616]

Someone swiftly tweeted the team photo page from the website—the make-up of the board at the time was nearly all white men—coupled with a sarcastic comment about diversity.

> [A]s soon as we launched the David Foster Wallace Society a little over a year ago it was immediately clear that the issues we would have to deal with right off the bat would have to be like, "is it all white dudes?" . . . I think it's a legit concern because you know my experience of [the] online Wallace community and then in the real-world Wallace community was that there were in fact a lot of women involved and that it was maybe truly a misrepresentation.[617]

The DFW Society didn't shirk the Twitter snark. By February, Matt Bucher, then-president of the society, wrote a statement on equality and inclusion that was published on the website.

> Anyone who has participated in any sort of online discussion about David Foster Wallace and his writing will have noticed that most of the participants are white males. Let's start this discussion there and say that we acknowledge that the small-but-burgeoning field of DFW Studies is not bursting with diversity. A glance at the list of Board members of our Society is no different—for now. We strive to change this, even incrementally, for the better. Our goal is to be among the most diverse, most inclusive literary societies in the world.[618]

Matt went on to detail actions the Society was taking to make good on this statement. One of those actions was the establishment of the Diversity Committee. By May the Diversity Committee was

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[613] Gray and Murray, p. 362.
[614] Gray and Murray, p. 370.
[615] Gray and Murray, p. 370.
[616] Matt Bucher, 'Statement on Equality and Inclusion', (2017). My emphasis.
[617] Matt Bucher, qtd. from 'Episode 37: Discussing David Foster Wallace with Andrea Laurencell Sheridan & Diego Báez', in *The Great Concavity,* ed. by Matt Bucher and Dave Laird (2017).
[618] 'Episode 37: Discussing David Foster Wallace with Andrea Laurencell Sheridan & Diego Báez'.

launched, with Diego Báez and Andrea Laurencell Sheridan as co-coordinators. Other members included Danielle Ely, Ashlie Kontos, Ryan William Lackey, and Cynthia Zhang—all of whom have written on issues of diversity in Wallace's work.[619] This does not mean we 'solved' diversity. But we are trying to head in the right direction; we currently have something like 300+ members from over 23 different countries.

The flipside of an antifan's frustration with what's hidden is the antifan's inability to hide from the fandom or fan object. For some people, and with particular fandoms, there is 'no hiding' from the thing they dislike.[620] 'While a whole host of high- or low-tech solutions present themselves to individuals wishing to censor media in a targeted manner,' it can be, Gray and Murray argue, 'near-impossible truly to turn off certain programmes and genres, even when one desires to do so . . . for various reasons, many citizens will be unable to 'refuse' or avoid media outright'.[621] And yet, refusal is becoming more and more a way for antifans to activate their dislike.[622] 'Media refusal, also termed media abstention, is the conscious and often performative choice to disengage from media, and is nearly always a decision inflected with strong affective feelings'.[623] When it comes to antifans of Wallace, activating their dislike by refusing to engage with his work is becoming a popular response, especially when antifans are, thanks to popular culture and the fervour of his fan base, unable to hide from Wallace. Representative of this pattern is Deirdre Coyle's article 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me'. Writing in 2017, before Wallace was posthumously implicated in #MeToo, Coyle describes her experience as an antifan:

> Small, liberal arts colleges are spawning ground for Wallace fans; mine was no exception. The guys at my college—and this is not necessarily an attack on their characters—did many predictable things: played ultimate frisbee, rallied against multinational beverage corporations, listened to The Mountain Goats, and told me to read *Infinite Jest*. These guys persevere after graduation.[624]

Coyle goes on to explain her irritation with Wallace fans and their irrepressible desire to foist Wallace onto her. She writes:

> My issue with many self-indulgent works by white men (the ones I've read, the ones I've given up on, and the ones I've refused to try) is not that I think they're evil or poorly written or even, necessarily, offensive (though plenty of them are), but that I can't find any entry point—and nothing incentivizes me to find one except other men's approval.[625]

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[619] Available at dfwsociety.org
[620] Gray and Murray, p. 370.
[621] Gray and Murray, p. 370.
[622] Gray and Murray, p. 363.
[623] Gray and Murray, p. 363.
[624] Coyle.
[625] Coyle.

Having been paid to read Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* for the purposes of the article, Coyle remains an antifan. Coyle's refusal (and yet, engagement—which is the distinction between a non- vs. anti-fan)[626] of Wallace is in response to her personal experience with his fans and also his elevated, iconic status in popular culture. This celebrity status bears on Wallace's place in academia, too, specifically in literary studies, where scholars and students are also often unable to hide from him. In an article titled 'On Refusing to Read', published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Amy Hungerford, a professor of English and dean of the humanities division at Yale University, publicly proclaims her refusal to read or teach Wallace. She cites, as one reason for this, a flawed system of canonisation in literary studies wherein 'the literary works that receive reviews or whose authors have become literary celebrities are often those that scholars of contemporary literature take up in their articles. Articles beget other articles . . . And so the cycle begins.[627] Caught up in this 'self-perpetuating machine of literary celebrity',[628] with the potential to contribute to it, Hungerford is unable to hide from Wallace unless she effectively hides him for and from herself. Hungerford says her 'small act of countercultural scholarly agency has been to refuse to continue reading or assigning the work of David Foster Wallace.[629] The machine of his celebrity masks,' she argues, 'the limited benefits of spending the time required to read his work'.[630] And this machine, according to Hungerford, is the result

> of a particular marketing campaign that appealed to a Jurassic vision of literary
> genius. The book's marketers were smart. They knew their audience and what kind of
> dare would provoke them: Are you smart enough and strong enough — indeed, are
> you man enough — to read a genius's thousand-page novel?[631]

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[626] This engagement, arguably, undermines her refusal, given that in very publicly activating her dislike of Wallace and his fans, both still occupy psychic space in her world and both still get attention and, regardless of the tone of this article, the overall publicity still keeps Wallace relevant in pop culture conversations. Coyle's piece is less about her personal refusal to read Wallace, and is, implicitly or not, more about provoking fans of Wallace and justifying her decision not to read his work. This isn't a criticism, but I think it's worth pointing out. It's also worth pointing out that her editor knew she hated Wallace/his fans and paid her to read a collection of Wallace's stories and write this piece for *Electric Literature*. From a practical perspective, I, like Coyle, would totally write about something I hated or wanted to disengage from if there was a paycheck for doing so. And if a side-effect of this was providing an outlet, or a kind of catharsis or solidarity, for people who feel similarly about the fannish object, well, that can be useful, too (although, the idealist in me thinks it'd be more productive not to congregate around a shared hatred of something—there's a fine line between productive criticism and just tearing something or someone down).

[627] Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*.

[628] Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*.

[629] Although, again, see FN614 re: this sort of public engagement undermining her refusal.

[630] Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*.

[631] Hungerford, *Making Literature Now*. There's maybe more to think through when it comes to this argument. Hungerford is responding to this vision of Wallace as a literary genius, but it's unclear how much of this she attributes (or can reasonably attribute) to the 1996 marketing campaign for *Infinite Jest* vs. the fandom that has grown around this novel and which has since come to be associated with and criticised for these sorts of male genius associations. It's possible that Wallace's celebrity was more the result of an organic (rather than corporate-initiated) fandom. I'm not sure that this undermines her overall argument so much as it might suggest a blinkered view, one that disregards some important other factors in why Wallace has loomed so large inside and outside of academia that bear greater consideration, especially when it comes to the value, or lack thereof, in reading his work.

At this juncture it behoves me to make some observations on the lesser-spotted lit-bro. A 2015 article in *Elle* magazine titled '6 Ways to Judge Him By His Lit-Bro Idol' is, well, self-explanatory. The list of lit-bro idols includes: Jack Kerouac, John Updike, Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Safran-Foer, Philip Roth, and Our Man, David Foster Wallace. Anna Breslaw informs her reader what the superfan for each of these idols looks like and what to do with (it is invariably a) Him.

> The Icon: David Foster Wallace
>
> The Superfan: He conveniently reserves reading *Infinite Jest* for when he's riding public transportation.
>
> What To Do With Him: After he says "discourse" three times in one sentence, wait until he goes to the bathroom, then take a glue gun from your purse and quietly lay some hot glue on his bar stool.[632]

Breslaw's is just one of many entries into the lit-bro article genre—a genre that circles around Wallace and his male contemporaries. In 2015, in response to the release of *The End of the Tour* (a movie based on the transcript of an interview between Wallace and *Rolling Stone* reporter David Lipsky while on a publicity tour for *Infinite Jest*) we had Molly Fischer's 'Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace,' followed by defences of Wallace: Jonathan Russell Clark's 'Reclaiming David Foster Wallace from the Lit-Bros,' and Scott Timberg's 'David Foster Wallace was not a bro: Let's not paint the writer with the same brush as his fans.' In 2017 we had Coyle's 'Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me.' And also an unironic 2019 entry into the debate titled 'Let us now praise famous lit bros,' where Nic Rowan writes (dubiously, let alone considerations of tact) that these lit-bro idols are 'sometimes knocked for being personally unpleasant. Wallace, famously, once tried to push a woman out of a moving car. But it is their popularity and critical success that is truly unforgivable.'[633] The prevalence of this lit-bro stuff in relation to Wallace has been significant enough for scholar Marshall Boswell to catalogue the bulk of these articles in the final chapter of his 2019

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[632] Anna Breslaw, '6 Ways to Judge Him by His Lit-Bro Idol', *Elle,* (2015) <https://www.elle.com/culture/books/a27230/6-lit-bros-you-can-totally-judge-guys-for-worshipping/> [accessed 21/2/2020].

[633] Nic Rowan, 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Lit Bros', *Washington Examiner,* (2019) <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/in-defense-of-david-foster-wallace-jonathan-franzen-and-the-lit-bro-canon> [accessed 21/2/2020].

book, *The Wallace Effect*.[634] The upshot of this is: Wallace 'has become lit-bro shorthand.'[635] Once an icon of a different kind, he is now 'a symbol of lit-bro culture'.[636] Ditto his 'rabid fan base'.[637]

If you're unfamiliar with the lit-bro type (or, more formally, 'literary chauvinist'), good on you! But in that case, here are a few tell-tale signs of how to spot him, specifically a Him that wants you to read Wallace:

> Make a passing reference to the "David Foster Wallace fanboy" and you can assume the reader knows whom you're talking about; he's the type who's pestered at least one woman to the point that she quit reading *Infinite Jest* in public. *Infinite Jest* — a novel that appears high on the list of 'Books That Literally All White Men Own.'[638]

> I once dated a David Foster Wallace fanboy. You know who I mean: He's white. He's straight. He went to a small liberal arts college. He interrogates you on which DFW books you've read—the novels, or just the essays? He's read *Infinite Jest* probably more than once. He thinks he has a unique take on the author's work and the man's life (and death).[639]

> Wallace is the lingua franca of a certain subset of overeducated, usually wealthy, extremely self-serious (mostly) men.[640]

> Writer David Foster Wallace has become shorthand for noxious, overbearing men in the literary community, as his legion of male fans project their own self-perceived sensitive, damaged brilliance into the late author.[641]

> He is a writer who's very attractive to a particular group of young, earnest, smart, white men.[642]

So, you know, Wallace fans have a bit of an image problem. And we know it.

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[634] Boswell writes that the 'Wallace Effect' is a 'mixture of envy, hagiography, and resentment that has come to mark Wallace's presence in the contemporary literary imagination.' (p.1) in Boswell.
[635] Molly Fischer, 'Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace', *The Cut,* (2015) <https://www.thecut.com/2015/08/david-foster-wallace-beloved-author-of-bros.html> [accessed 21/2/2020].
[636] Clare Hayes Brady qtd. in Steve Paulson, 'David Foster Wallace in the #Metoo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady', *Los Angeles Review of Books,* (2018) <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/> [accessed 21/2/2020].
[637] Paulson, 'David Foster Wallace in the #Metoo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady'.
[638] Fischer.
[639] Em Perper, 'The Cult Could Become a Church: On David Foster Wallace', *Longreads,* (2015) <https://longreads.com/2015/07/01/the-cult-could-become-a-church-on-david-foster-wallace/> [accessed 21/2/2020].
[640] Alex Shephard, 'Neil Gorsuch Will Be Our First Lit Bro Supreme Court Justice.', *The New Republic,* (2017) <https://newrepublic.com/minutes/141498/neil-gorsuch-will-first-lit-bro-supreme-court-justice> [accessed 21/2/2020].
[641] Brett Williams, 'We Need to Lay Off the Overzealous Hero-Worship of Elon Musk', *Mashable Australia,* (2017) <https://mashable.com/2017/12/15/the-dangerous-cult-of-elon-musk-david-foster-wallace/> [accessed 21/2/2020].
[642] Hayes Brady qtd. in Paulson, 'David Foster Wallace in the #Metoo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady'.

Judd S.
Fri Jan 10 12:14:10 UTC 2020

But (and this is the part I wanted to share, about the nature of
Wallace fandom): Then he died. Then the biography came out, and we
learned how he was human, and flawed. Shocking. And Wallace fandom
started to become this kind of joke: "white men explain DFW to me",
that kind of thing . . . Then #metoo and cancel culture, etc. At any
rate, it became complicated to love him. (Which I definitely still do,
for the record.) It's like, the work remains great, but the whole
cultural aura around it shifted, to the point where (and I'm
sorry/ashamed to say this) I'm kind of embarrassed to "out" myself to
people as a Wallace Head. Anyway, maybe it's just me. But there it is.

Maria B.
Fri Jan 10 14:32:41 UTC 2020

Judd is right, Wallace is the sort of writer who can get you in the
soup with certain people. But it's always been a little bit like this.
At first you'd be accused of pretentiousness, pseudointellectualism;
now, of admiring a predator.

Daniel J.
Sun Jan 12 23:29:37 UTC 2020

I generally would not identify myself in public as a DFW-fan, but this
was true before the revelations of his personal behaviour. It isn't
that his fans are toxic, exactly, but those who loudly self-identify
as such tend to be nearly the opposite of the sorts of people I get
along with. But I did read THE PALE KING twice consecutively just last
summer, and if I meet somebody interested in capital-L literature, I
will gladly evangelize about Infinite Jest more than I would for, say,
Thomas Pynchon. It often feels now, that the evangelization has to be
done with a caveat or two, but so be it.

Michael G.
Mon Jan 13 01:52:07 UTC 2020

Then there's the culture and how we're handling culture these days.
David Foster Wallace and Woody Allen are two artists who I feel
strongly about who have been cancelled in some circles . . . I wish
Wallace were with us through this because I do believe he had the
character and insight to have make real amends and shown growth . . .
I spent a lot of time, in the 90s and early aughts, in the boozing,
drugging and fucking section of the bookstore. I do think we've
largely forgotten that truly iconoclastic thinkers don't, for the most
part, lead conventionally moral lives. At the same time, I get that
it's been too many women shot in Mexico, or beaten or threatened or
stalked or cheated on or stolen from and that we're no longer in a
cultural place where you trade another nameless woman for a William
Burroughs.

William L.
Tue Jan 14 14:54:36 UTC 2020

#MeToo happened. Mary Karr happened. My Boyfriend Explains DFW
happened. The head of Lit at Yale said she'd never teach Wallace,
would never read him. The biggest trouble was, they all seemed to be,
to one degree or another, correct. Well, not the Yale person. But
still . . . Am I a fan? I used to say that immediately to people, "I'm
a fan," as a way of being unpretentious, a way of saying I'm not a
Wallace bro who's going to be obnoxious and condescending. Or an

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academic. Or a serious documentarian. I'm just a fan. But the word now
has such bad connotations --- I'm not a Swiftie or a Beehive person.
Or building an altar to Saint Dave. I was into it for the cultural
critique, the fun, the overall brilliance and literary craft . . . Now
I say I'm a reader of Wallace . . .  White, liberal arts men of my
generation, who think as progressives, and have questioned masculinity
and racism all our adult lives now have a double quandary. At the same
moment, we're being gently moved out of prime position as the future
takes hold, the natural movement of time, along with it comes a
denunciation of our very existence by the new down-with-white-man-
power-in-all-its-overt-and-subtle-forms arguments. And those arguments
seem correct to me, in large. And Wallace is held up as an exemplar of
that. So it's tough. How do you preserve the value of him while
rejecting the problematic. Is it possible? I hope so. Maybe the way
out is in the non-white-males who so relate to Wallace. That's always
gratifying to hear about.
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○

I don't want to belabour this lit-bro stuff—you can find the articles online if you want to speculate as to why this type has been associated with Wallace, but this essay is not really about that. I bring the lit-bro to your attention because it is a stereotype of Wallace fans. But, like all stereotypes, it's a pretty hollow way to understand people. This awkward inheritance, however deserved, is compounded by the anti-DFW sentiment that really took hold across the years 2012-present, after D. T. Max's biography of Wallace revealed his abusive behaviour towards Mary Karr. Since 2018, in light of #MeToo and cancel culture, loving Wallace is no longer just about being a pretentious pseudo-intellectual twat; loving Wallace brings with it the weight of a tradition of white men abusing their power. For fans who are bothered by this, loving Wallace brings with it an element of shame.

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Eleni S.
Mon Apr 21 14:40:44 CDT 2014

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It feels a little bit like an AA meeting, so let me start by openly
admitting I am a Wallace-fiend myself.
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Hi, my name is Grace, and I am a fan of Wallace. I've been a Wallace fan since I was given 'Good Old Neon' to read for my undergrad degree. After that, I wanted more. I found interviews on YouTube. Became infatuated with the guy. Bought all his books. My life began to revolve around Wallace. An ex-boyfriend gave me an A2 print of Wallace in front of a cornfield for my birthday. I wrote on Wallace for my Honours thesis. Went on to write on him for my PhD. Went to my first Wallace conference in 2016. Then again in 2017. And 2018. And 2019. Joined the editorial team for *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*. Became a board member of the DFW Society. Spent a

year in America researching Wallace, making the pilgrimages to the Harry Ransom Center and Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, again, and again.

But in May 2018, halfway through my year in the US, Mary Karr tweeted about Wallace's abusive behaviour. I'd assumed my love of Wallace had always been a bit embarrassing, in a benign way. Now it felt different, shameful, and like I had to make a choice between being a fan and my moral values—and like I'd be judged accordingly.

○

The verdict was already pretty much in on Wallace, but there was still plenty to be said about his fans. In her analysis of three examples of antifandom (#Gamergate, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* book series, and the 2016 remake of *Ghostbusters* featuring female leads) Bethan Jones writes that 'antifans construct an image of the text which they then react against'.[643] As a basis for her own case studies, Jones draws on research done by Jonathan Gray, who in 2010 called 'for taking paratexts seriously— that is, the variety of materials that surround a text and affect the ways it is read—when studying antifandom, as they may be the only contact the antifan has with the text they react against'.[644] As many performative refusals of Wallace attest, a lot of antifans have little contact with the work themselves, many outright avoiding it. What does circulate for fans and antifans alike are the paratexts that emphasise the figure of the lit-bro, with its misogynist connotations. If you pay attention, for a lot of Wallace antifans it is not specifically or only Wallace that they are railing against—it's his fans. Though motivation for this varies from antifan to antifan, the collective vibe of these refusals is rejection on moral and ethical grounds. A significant portion of antifans of the *Fifty Shades* series, for example, criticised the books for 'the way the books presented BDSM as a form of abuse, and how they romanticized an abusive relationship'.[645] These particular criticisms were moral, not aesthetic. This evidences what Jonathan Gray calls 'antifandom of the moral text'.[646] Expressions of antifandom around Wallace, particularly post-2018, are often framed as moral objections to his work, to his fans, or to the forces (institutional or otherwise) that sustain or laud his celebrity and that, before #MeToo, paid little mind to his abusive behaviour.

It's worth noting here, even briefly, that if Wallace fans have an image problem, fans in general haven't historically fared much better. Beyond being stigmatised one way or another, they've been pathologised—their behaviour described as deviant and 'equated with obsession and excess'.[647]

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[643] Jones, p. 415.
[644] Jones, p. 415.
[645] Jones, p. 416.
[646] Jones, p. 418.
[647] Nicolle Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), p. 13.

Characterised as either (or both) 'the obsessed individual and the hysterical crowd,'[648] fandom is 'seen as a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction,' and therefore can be treated as a 'them' distinguished from the rest of us.[649] This can cut both ways. As Henry Jenkins says, '[t]o speak as a fan is to accept what has been labeled a subordinated position within the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional authorities.' But, he adds, 'it is also to speak from a position of collective identity, to forge an alliance with a community of others in defense of tastes which, as a result, cannot be read as totally aberrant or idiosyncratic'. Jenkins reports that 'one of the most often heard comments from new fans is their surprise in discovering how many people share their fascination with a particular series, their pleasure in discovering that they are not "alone."'[650]

○

In an essay for GQ,[651] Michael Chabon wrote about his 13-year-old son Abe's love of fashion. After taking the boy to Paris Fashion Week, little Abe cries when it is time to leave. Chabon writes:

> You are born into a family and those are your people, and they know you and they love you and if you are lucky they even, on occasion, manage to understand you. And that ought to be enough. But it is never enough. Abe had not been dressing up, styling himself, for all these years because he was trying to prove how different he was from everyone else. He did it in the hope of attracting the attention of somebody else—somewhere, someday—who was the *same.* He was not flying his freak flag; he was sending up a flare, hoping for rescue, for company in the solitude of his passion.

"You were with your people. You found them," he tells Abe.

I was 22 years old when I found my people. They were all on an email listserv called wallace-l. I couldn't believe my luck. Hidden in plain text were people asking the same questions as me, standing next to me (virtually) and thinking about the same work of art. Many of the people I met then are still some of my best friends online. They were as real to me as any people I had met in real life--and as it happens I have met many (if not all) of those people "in real life."

[648] Joli Jenson, 'Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Characterization', in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media,* ed. by Lisa A. Lewis (New York : Routledge, 1992), (p. 9).

[649] Jenson, p. 9.

[650] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, (New York: New York : Routledge, 1992), p. 23. I want to note that, of course, Wallace fandom isn't the first and only fan community. While I won't be going into detail about these communities here, a lot of existing research in fan studies looks at, for example, Harry Potter fans, Trekkies/Trekkers, Springsteen fans, fans of Star Wars, etc. The sense of community for these fandoms is as strong as what I'm describing here with the Wallace community, and there are rich histories out there of these communities and their fan practices that are well worth investigating if this discussion has piqued your interest. Some good starting points would be: Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, (New York: Routledge, 2002); Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like Us: Music & Meaning among Springsteen Fans*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[651] Michael Chabon, 'My Son, the Prince of Fashion', *GQ,* (2016) <https://www.gq.com/story/my-son-the-prince-of-fashion?verso=true> [accessed 21/2/2020].

Friendships with people I know from "David-Foster-Wallace-Land" are now so integral to my "real life" that I don't know how they could ever be separated out into something like a hobby or field of study. This is my life, for better or worse.

I am not an expert on David Foster Wallace's writing and work. There are far more accomplished scholars who have written and published on virtually every facet of his work. What turned out to be my real passion and area of interest was the community that rose up around Wallace's work. I believe there is nothing else like it. There are some people who cross paths with the Wallace community at a conference or publishing event and they just pass through. There are others who discover a podcast or a twitter feed or an email list and know immediately they have found someone who is the same. They have found their people.[652]

○

Jenkins, along with other scholars in fandom studies, have been challenging the pathologising of fandom, rejecting 'media-fostered stereotypes of fans as cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers,' and instead seeing 'fans as active producers and manipulators of meanings'.[653] 'Fans are often highly articulate . . . [they] interpret media texts in a variety of interesting and perhaps unexpected ways. And fans participate in communal activities—they are not 'socially atomised' or isolated viewers/readers'.[654] Rather than connotations of unwellness, research has shown us that fans have way more going for us than previously thought, especially when it comes to building our identity and our community.

Although we are at base level also consumers, fans 'differ from consumers in the extent to which they invest and actively engage in their particular interest, with fans being more intellectually, emotionally, behaviorally, and ideologically involved than ordinary consumers'.[655] Fans 'identify themselves through their interests,'[656] and one of the positive aspects of fandom is how it helps a person construct and understand their identity.[657] Fandom is a 'symbolic project of the self,'[658] and is valuable for people who feel like they don't fit in, in that it 'helps individuals anchor identity in a society that causes them anxiety over identity construction'.[659]

[652] Matt Bucher, 'Personal Correspondence', (2019).
[653] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, p. 23.
[654] Hills, p. viii.
[655] S. L. Groene, 'Are You "Fan" Enough? The Role of Identity in Media Fandoms', *Psychology of popular media culture.*, 5 (2015), 325.
[656] Courtney N. Plante and others, '"One of Us": Engagement with Fandoms and Global Citizenship Identification', *Psychology of Popular Media Culture,* 3 (2014), 49.
[657] Anastasia Seregina and John W. Schouten, 'Resolving Identity Ambiguity through Transcending Fandom', *Consumption Markets & Culture,* 20 (2017), 111.
[658] John B. Thompson qtd. in Matthew Hills, 'Media Fandom, Neoreligiosity, and Cult(Ural) Studies', *Velvet Light Trap,* 46 (2000), 73.
[659] Seregina and Schouten, p. 111.

As mentioned, emotion's a big part of it all. Cornel Sandvoss defines fandom as the 'regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text,'[660] and Nicolle Lamerichs writes that '[b]eing a fan is an experience that is grounded in a feeling'.[661] It is the stereotypical excess of emotion associated with fans (think Beatlemania, etc.) that prompts 'some to see fandom as pathological and potentially dangerous'.[662] But it is this 'affective orientation' of fandom that 'help[s] to form bonds between individuals that sustain a sense of community'.[663] A psychological sense of community (PSOC) is defined as 'the perception of similarity with others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure'.[664] PSOC is 'associated with greater social support, . . . life satisfaction, . . . quality of life, . . . and social and subjective well-being'.[665] It is 'one of the most important factors for social involvement and citizen participation in social and political activity'.[666] This sense of community is often a significant and cherished component of fandom, and although fans may never meet all other members of the fan community in person (and for this reason are often described as 'imagined' communities)[667] they nevertheless feel 'a sense of belonging, kinship or comradeship in relation to them'.[668] A psychological sense of community can be stronger and more emotionally grounding than many IRL relationships.

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George C.
Thu Jan 9 19:31:38 UTC 2020

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in its heyday, the fellow travelers of wallace-l were some of the
closest emotional connections in my life.
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Matt B.
Mon Jan 13 15:03:07 UTC 2020

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My older son was born in 2007 and for his middle name I picked Wallace
really as a tribute to this list rather than the human being David
Foster Wallace. This list and this community means more to me than
pretty much any other community in my life.
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[660] C. Sandvoss, 'One-Dimensional Fan: Toward an Aesthetic of Fan Texts', *The American behavioral scientist.,* 48 (2005), 8.
[661] Lamerichs, pp. 18-19.
[662] Dean, p. 412.
[663] Dean, p. 413.
[664] Daniel Chadborn, Patrick Edwards, and Stephen Reysen, 'Reexamining Differences between Fandom and Local Sense of Community', *Psychology of Popular Media Culture,* 7 (2018), 241.
[665] Chadborn, Edwards, and Reysen, p. 242.
[666] Chadborn, Edwards, and Reysen, p. 242.
[667] This term is borrowed from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* (London: Verso, 2006).
[668] Dean, p. 413.

Hillary B.
Mon Jan 13 00:22:39 UTC 2020

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there was certainly a time when this community was very important to
me. It reminds me of hanging out on BBSes back in the early days of
the internet, where I also found people who felt like a lifeline.
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Richard S.
Wed Jan 15 10:50:19 UTC 2020

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I think I have felt a kind of freedom here. I have felt that if I
devote the time to post enough (and the time to read and think
enough), I can be a visible member of this community . . . I love you
all in a weird, unique, impersonal-but-close way.
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Jared B.
Fri Apr 18 16:04:00 CDT 2014

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I discovered Wallace about ten years ago . . . bought IJ and, like a
lot of you, it changed me and my life . . . Tried to convince friends
to read IJ, just so I could talk about it with someone, but failed -
and so found this list, probably about eight years ago . . . I
remember being astounded and comforted by the fact that people were
just as affected by this book as I was - and remember saying to one of
my friends: 'See, it's not just me['] . . . And listening and learning
from you all, especially in the early days when I had just finished IJ
and my world was upside down, has been an absolute pleasure. I check
the list every day - anonymous, a stranger, but still - part of a
collective that, without even knowing it, has changed my life for the
better, and been a friend to me in the darkest times.
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Amy B.
Tue Apr 22 19:44:25 CDT 2014

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i don't contribute to the list very often, but i'm always grateful for
the community.
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Trent C.
Mon Apr 21 12:43:21 CDT 2014

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I almost can't believe I've been on here for nearly five years. I
think this is a great and wonderful community, and am so pleased you
all continue to be in my life. I love you guys.
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○

And yet, depathologising fandom is an ongoing project. Aside from the lit-bro 'fanning over a predator' thing, Wallace fans also have to contend with being cast as being in a cult. [669] The idea of the 'fan' has never been a leap too far from the idea of the 'fanatic' (and all the attendant religious connotations). It's built into the word and its etymology, and into the history of fandom studies where, perhaps in some unhelpful ways, 'scholars have approached fandom as a form of religion'. [670] Fans

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[669] See, for example: Stephen Burn, 'The Cult of Dfw: How David Foster Wallace Became a Literary Icon', in *To The Best of Our Knowledge,* (2015).;D. T. Max, 'Why David Foster Wallace Should Not Be Worshipped as a Secular Saint', *The Guardian,* (2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/09/david-foster-wallace-worshipped-secular-saint> [accessed 21/2/2020].;Lorentzen.

[670] Lamerichs, p. 15.

have also, perhaps in some unhelpful ways, relied on religious metaphors to explain 'who they are and what they do'.[671] I've certainly heard and used these metaphors in relation to Wallace fans, and I've used them in relation to my own Wallace fanship (even in this very essay). Going to the Harry Ransom Center to use the Wallace archive, or making it to Bloomington-Normal for the Wallace conference—both these journeys have been described as pilgrimages. The whole religiosity of Wallace fandom is also helped along by the posthumous 'Saint Dave' image.[672] When we share our how-we-came-to-Wallace ('Our Man') stories, these tend to follow the narrative structure of conversion stories; we talk about our life before and after discovering Wallace, and the personal transformation that occurred between these two periods, on account of discovering his work.[673] We seek out and try to interpret all materials related to Wallace. We make all kinds of tributes to Wallace. We labour in love to maintain our community and our connection to Wallace.

In his book on Springsteen fans, Daniel Cavicchi writes that

> the connection between fandom and religion even goes beyond this metaphorical language; there are several structural parallels between the lives of Christian believers and the lives of fans. Both Christianity and fandom often involve a "turning," the development of a close attachment to an unattainable other; the stories both fans and evangelical Christians tell about such experiences have a similar structure and social importance. Connected to that turning is the fact that Christianity and fandom involve a particular kind of moral orientation in which people derive meaning and value not from direct communication with the other but rather by signs and representations; as Christians' ongoing, daily life of devotion to God involves interpretation of the Bible and thinking about how God's will is revealed in their lives, so fans' ongoing, daily life of devotion to music involves interpretation of Springsteen's songs and puzzling over how the music addresses their experiences. Finally, Christianity and fandom engender similar kinds of community based on the sharing of a specific but largely immeasurable devotion and rituals and traditions that sustain that devotion . . . Because of such structural parallels, people have sometimes interpreted fandom literally as a kind of "cult".[674]

The same may as well be said of Wallace fans. But interpreting fandom as a literal cult 'miss[es] the point'.[675] Using religious language to help us talk and think about fandom is not to claim that our fandom is a religion; it 'point[s] to the fact that both fandom and religion are addressing similar concerns and engaging people in similar ways.[676] And fans' motivations for their engagement with a particular kind of entertainment (be it Springsteen's songs or Wallace's writing) can help us understand why a comparison with religion makes sense, even to an atheist like me.

Take, for example, a 2011 fandom study that differentiated between hedonic and eudaimonic motivations to engage with entertainment. 'Whereas hedonic motivation is characterized as more

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[671] Cavicchi, p. 185.
[672] See, for example: Alsup.
[673] For more detail on the patterns these stories can follow, see Cavicchi, pp. 43-45.
[674] Cavicchi, pp. 185-86.
[675] Cavicchi, p. 187.
[676] Cavicchi, p. 187.

positively valenced and driven by pleasure and diversion, eudaimonic motivation is the desire to seek meaning and insight into human experiences from media texts'.[677] People whose fandom is eudaimonically driven are 'interested in more cognitively involved media experiences that enhance psychological wellbeing (i.e., the search for meaning in life), rather than media offerings which solely provide excitement, delight, and escapism'.[678] '[F]ans value their fandom,' Cavicchi says, 'for the ways it addresses the existential reality of their daily lives, how it creates needed meaning, identity, and community in a world in which such things are absent or ephemeral'.[679] Joli Jenson, who wrote on the pathologising of fans as deviants, believes that 'what it means to be a fan should be explored in relation to the larger question of what it means to desire, cherish, seek, long, admire, envy, celebrate, protect, ally with others'. Fandom, Jenson argues, is one part of 'how we make sense of the world, in relation to mass media, and in relation to our historical, social, cultural location. Thinking well about fans and fandom can help us think more fully and respectfully about what it means today to be alive and to be human'.[680]

In the same way that religion stands apart from regular life, representing 'an alternative society based on the kingdom of God,'[681] 'fandom represents for fans a refuge from the turmoil of everyday life, an institution that exists above the ordinary and provides a steady and continual source of values, identity, and belonging'.[682] And in this sense, the word 'cult' might be provocative and not always appropriate to how fans of Wallace understand their attachment, but the religiosity of the word, at its heart, is simply about finding a place you feel welcomed by people who share your values and make life bright. If being a fan, particularly a fan with eudaimonic motivations, helps you make sense of and find meaning in life, then being part of a fandom helps you find somewhere to place that meaning.

I don't think we can (and as fans, I don't think we do) overestimate the value of finding somewhere we belong. In a study that investigated the relationship between fan identity and well-being, evidence suggested that 'overall fan identity predicted overall well-being'.[683] Additionally, 'social fan identity,' that is, the identity we gain over time through interacting with other fans as part of a community, 'predicted relational well-being and marginally predicted physical well-being'.[684] One study showed that 'membership in a fan community enhances enjoyment, appreciation, physiological responses, knowledge acquisition, and intention to seek fan-related materials,' and that

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[677] Oliver and Raney (2011) cited in M. Tsay-Vogel, 'Fandom and the Search for Meaning: Examining Communal Involvement with Popular Media Beyond Pleasure', *Psychology of popular media culture.,* 6 (2015), 34.
[678] Tsay-Vogel, p. 34.
[679] Cavicchi, p. 185.
[680] Jenson, pp. 26-27.
[681] Cavicchi, p. 188.
[682] Cavicchi, p. 188.
[683] Cynthia Vinney and others, 'Development and Validation of a Measure of Popular Media Fan Identity and Its Relationship to Well-Being', *Psychology of Popular Media Culture,* 8 (2019), 1.
[684] Vinney and others p. 1.

a strong sense of social identity could have implications for 'perceived sense of community, social prestige, and self-esteem.'[685] Another study explored how people who feel a lack of cultural, social, and symbolic capital (a lack of which 'leads to ambiguity regarding [our] identities and places in the world') may turn to fandom 'for gaining status and belonging,' because fandoms are 'consumption fields with clear, limited forms of cultural capital'.[686] Although this risks making being a fan sound only consumer-ish and social-climber-y, what it basically means, here at least, is that in a 'consumer culture tradition' that has shifted the responsibility for identity definition 'from socializing institutions to individual consumers,' people who are not automatically blessed with the skill of accumulating cultural capital and who find it hard to fit in are able to become part of a community that has pretty 'clear guidelines in a context of overwhelming choice'.[687] Fandom, already shown in numerous studies to aid 'identity building and self-reflection,'[688] may help us understand who we are and how we can relate to other people, and can allow 'individuals [to] anchor identity in a society that causes them anxiety over identity construction'.[689]

While I don't want to characterise Wallace fans as lonely people who are unable to navigate contemporary society, I can at least say that I pretty much meet the criteria for a fan who's built their identity (at least, a huge chunk of it) from their fandom and used that fandom to help me work out who I am and where I fit. Fans that highly identify with their fandom, as I do, 'place greater emphasis on incorporating their fandom into their self-concept . . . [and] are, therefore, more sensitive to stimuli with the potential of affirming or threatening that aspect of their identity'.[690] Hence this essay, in no small part a response to feeling my identity (at least the security of my identity) threatened, if not culturally rejected.

○

I've written elsewhere about how reading Wallace helped me manage my eating disorder and anxiety when my mental health went to shit in 2014. That's the story of how I became a Wallace fan. The truth is that it bothers me to have that identity threatened, but it's not the kind of threat that's likely to make me disavow his work or what reading him did for me. The kind of threat I'm less resilient to is the sort that disaffirms other fans of Wallace, because I am a fan of them. So rather than rehash my Wallace conversion story here, I want instead to tell you the story of how I became a fan of Wallace fans. This story is recorded, albeit in fragments, in entries excerpted from the journal I kept when I took my second trip to the US for the 2017 Wallace conference in Normal, Illinois. I'd found the

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[685] Tsay-Vogel, pp. 41, 42.
[686] Seregina and Schouten, p. 107.
[687] Seregina and Schouten, p. 107.
[688] Seregina and Schouten, p. 108.
[689] Seregina and Schouten, pp. 108, 11.
[690] Groene, p. 326.

previous year's trip hard, for reasons of loneliness and fragile mental health. In 2016 I hadn't known anyone from the Wallace community and didn't know how to be the kind of extrovert that could make the most of meeting people. I didn't know how to make conversation in hallways. I worried I'd feel like an outsider all over again with DFW17.

However, a few things were different this year. After DFW16, Tony McMahon, another Aussie and one of the people I did meet at the conference (had actually kind of hunted down, thinking the fact that we were both Australian was, at least, a conversation starter, if not a thing that'd implicitly bind us together as friends) had invited me to join the editorial team for *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*. The DFW Society was also launched in January 2017, and the journal's affiliation with the Society meant I was in somewhat regular, albeit online only, contact with steadfast members of the Wallace community. At DFW17 I'd be meeting many of these people IRL for the first time. I hoped for the best—Lots of new friends! Never a lonely moment again! Take *that* 2016-Grace!

Things did not start well. On June 5, somewhere between Sydney and Dallas Fort Worth, I wrote in my journal that 'my mind was turning in on itself, getting scared of empty time and sadness on this trip'. I was thrown back to 2016, wondering 'why it still feels hard'. On June 7, I wrote that I was nervous to meet people I'd only known from Slack/Twitter at the conference due to begin the next day. I ended that entry on a note of forced optimism: 'Guess we'll see!'

June 8

As I walked into the registration room, walked right into Matt Bucher & Rob Short. Matt immediately recognised me and introduced himself—I told myself to manage my expectations of social-ness at this conference but couldn't have had it go better. So happy. It's been a good day. I like these people. I'm sure I'll miss them when this is over.

June 9

[A]t 5:30pm it was the live stream/recording of ep 29 The Great Concavity podcast. That was awesome. Matt + Dave interviewed Charlie Harris and Jim Plath who is the president of the Updike society. They also did giveaways and I won the first lot for having travelled farthest to DFW17! I had like a total celebrity moment (as in super geek fan) as I walked up & chose a book. Scored Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace*. And a couple of The Great Concavity stickers—SO chuffed. Before dinner, Matt came up & invited me to hang out w/ the DFW17 folks . . . Honestly, I felt like I was in a dream—I came to the conference expecting to have to manage my expectations about making friends because my daydreams were just that. But it's been all that and more. I've felt seen this year . . . And they are as cool and nice as I hoped they'd be. And they wanted to include me. And I felt a bit like the geek who finally gets invited to sit with the cool kids except it's not as disingenuous or flimsy as that—this was easy, felt real, felt like maybe I'm finding my people and maybe it'll be a two-way street and I can give to them what they're giving me. It's been brilliant.

June 10

It's been an intense 3 days and I'm overtired and so grateful to these people & this conference. I'm deflated at it being over.

June 16

Got coffee & sat outside to reply to Dave Laird because he and Matt have asked me to be their next guest on TGC podcast!!!!!!! No joke, dream come true. Weird thing is I realised there is no-one in my life, except maybe DFW scholars, that would get why this is such a big deal to me . . . I really didn't expect to be asked and at best hoped for either a 5 min guest spot or a mention in their DFW17 recap. I am so fricken overwhelmed w/ happiness. I will, of course, freak out before we record & worry I'm a fraud, not smart enough, not well-read enough, not quick enough, not funny or interesting enough etc etc. But actually I know I'm ok & will be ok. But come on! I'm getting the same airtime as Jeff Severs and John Mango and all the DFW scholar names! And I know they're just people & human like me blaaah but also I admire them all so much & for them to treat me as their equal is so cool. I've found my people . . . Seriously, this conference has exceeded even my highest expectations, let alone my managed ones . . . I called mum & told her about the podcast—and she was happy for me because she could hear (and I told her) how big it was, but I could tell she didn't really know what I was on about—but I love that she is happy for me anyway.

Lol. What a dork. The flight home from DFW17, needless to say, was very different to the flight over.

June 19

[I]t makes me smile & feel light when I think about these past two weeks. I think, actually, I can tell I've made progress. I feel that w/r/t myself and in terms of being part of a community and setting up a foundation for next year.[692] I know 2018 will be hard in different (and probably in some cases, same) ways but I feel stronger. This trip had its moments too, but to poorly paraphrase DFW, I think I have some machinery inside me now—stuff I've built—that equips me to handle things & to handle stuff in less time & with less emotional stress. I mean, that sounds mechanic. I just mean I'm learning how to cope better. It won't prevent me from ever feeling anxious or sad or despairing, but I have a trust in myself that I didn't have years ago. So, you know, yay.

This account only approximates what the Wallace community gave me that year, and what it's continued to give me in the years since. Reading Wallace isn't the only thing that's supported my mental health. So yeah, I'm a fan of the fans of Wallace. The community means a lot to me. And in that, I'm not alone.

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[692] In 2018 I went back to the US for 11 months on a Fulbright scholarship.

Go looking for digital evidence of the Wallace community and you will find the following community projects: group read sites including 'Infinite Winter' and 'Infinite Summer', The Great Concavity Podcast, text-specific wikis, Chris Ayer's Poor Yorick Entertainment tumblr, 'A Visual Exploration of the Filmography of James O. Incandenza,' Wallace subreddits, and, of course, the wallace-l listserv and The Howling Fantods website.[693] Offline, beyond the aforementioned 16+ academic conferences, there are also creative outputs by artists who work with and respond to Wallace across different media including visual art, graphic design, music composition and erasure poetry. And there's the DFW Society and *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies*, too. Every single one of these projects (and this is not an exhaustive list) are labours of love for the Wallace community, the only financial recompense maybe being Patreon donations. So: 'What is it that compels thousands of strangers to organize themselves—both on the internet and in person—for the sole purpose of talking to each other about David Foster Wallace's writing?'[694]

> The few times I've been lucky enough to make some small contribution to projects like these, I've always come away from the experience feeling like I'm running on rocket fuel. Collaborative work has the unique ability to remind me why it was that I started writing about Wallace in the first place. Whatever my level of participation, I always get back far more than what I put in. But none of [these projects] would exist without the dedicated folks who maintain them and whose involvement far exceeds anything that could reasonably be called "participation." Given the amount of labor required, what drives those who devote their time and energy to the creation and maintenance of projects like these? . . . The only plausible theory for this kind of dedication to an author's work I've come across (other than sheer psychosis) is Lewis Hyde's conception of "gift economies," which he outlines in his book *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*.[695]

We've covered a few ways that being part of a fan community can benefit members, but what actually forms, and then what sustains, such a community? This sort of thing goes beyond just being a fan of a writer. The answer is: gift culture. Or gift economy, whichever you prefer. Gift culture is 'strongly embedded in the Western fan experience,'[696] and '[f]andom has often been discussed, by both scholars and fans themselves, as a sharing economy, and specifically as a gift economy based on giving, receiving, and reciprocating'.[697] Gifts include a whole range of creative labours—we could describe everything on the above list of Wallace projects as a gift. Even 'forms of fan work . . . that

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[693] Thanks to Rob Short for compiling much of this list.

[694] Robert W. Short, 'Readers Anonymous: Dfw's Transformative Gifts and the Labor of Gratitude', in *Simple Ranger,* (2016).

[695] Short, 'Readers Anonymous: Dfw's Transformative Gifts and the Labor of Gratitude'.

[696] Karen Hellekson, 'The Fan Experience', in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies,* ed. by Paul Booth (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), pp. 65-77 (p. 71).

[697] Tisha Turk, 'Fan Work: Labor, Worth, and Participation in Fandom's Gift Economy', *Transformative Works and Cultures,* 15 (2014) <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/518> [accessed 2/2/2020].

[do] not necessarily result in objects for recirculation' are considered gifts.[698] Comments or social media shares would go in the gift category, or, a Wallace-specific example, one listener writing show notes (time-stamping each new topic of conversation) for episodes of The Great Concavity so that other listeners could easily navigate the podcasts. Much of what fans produce is 'not art but information, discussion, architecture, access, resources, metadata'.[699] There is a lot of behind-the-scenes labour that goes into maintaining the DFW Society and the journal, organising and running conferences, making newsletters and merch, recording podcast episodes, being active on social media, collecting and collating research and Wallace-related links, and so on. The architecture and maintenance of the Wallace community is the result of collaborative work and gift culture.

As the word implies, a gift is something that is given, not bought; '[w]ithin the ethos of the fan world, many fan artworks . . . may only be exchanged through a gift culture, without money (except for shipping or materials) changing hands'.[700] Gifts in fan communities are not usually, or not only, one-to-one exchanges. In these communities, giving is not just reciprocal but circular, one-to-many, and understanding this aspect of the system helps us 'better understand the relationship between gift exchange and community formation'.[701] When a gift moves in a circle, per Lewis Hyde, 'its motion is beyond the control of the personal ego, and so each bearer must be a part of the group and each donation is an act of social faith'.[702] Receiving a gift is as important, in this economy, as the giving; though gifts are valuable in that they are 'designed to create and cement a social structure,'[703] this structure is reinforced by a gift 'being accepted—which is to say, consumed or used'.[704] The value and the rewards of fan labour can be found in how these gifts are taken up by the community. Receiving, then, constitutes another form of participation in fandom.[705] This is good news for lurkers like me, who don't produce but do want to participate in fandom's gift economy. Appreciating a gift is a way for fans to give back even when they're not sure what they have to give. For example, in an email thread where other wallace-l members were introducing themselves to each other, a fellow lurker wrote:

Chuckie M.
Sat Apr 26 17:59:46 CDT 2014

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I've been reading almost every post here, but this is my first time
posting . . . I felt compelled to try to say 'hello', even though I
find it difficult and awkward, because you all said 'hello' . . . I
have taken a lot from this mailing list, and it's probably time to
give back, even something as small as this . . . Thank you all for
posting your bios and all the information you put up here. I read
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[698] Turk.
[699] Turk.
[700] Hellekson, p. 71.
[701] Turk.
[702] Hyde qtd. in Turk.
[703] Hellekson qtd. in Turk.
[704] Turk.
[705] Turk.

everything! It makes me happy! That's kind of a big deal for me. Thank
you!

The gift economy of the Wallace community ranges from the amorphous stuff, like the
ongoing intellectual generosity between members—

Krzys
Sun Apr 20 22:57:38 CDT 2014

Since I've gotten pretty good at lurking for years and years--this
being my first message--odds are high it might also be the last. But
what a jolly wonderful crew teaching me so many things over the years
with so much generosity and warmth!

—to the tangible, like one list member's creation of the Wallace *samizdat*, a chapbook
compiled as '[a] holiday present for [his] newfound online friends'.[706]

George C.
Fri Apr 18 14:45:13 CDT 2014

During 2003, I led wallace-l efforts of gathering and sharing all of
DFW's un-anthologized work, which became a chapbook called the David
Foster Wallace Reader around Christmas 2003, and which I'm still proud
of. I doubt there are very many paper copies left, but I think someone
eventually scanned the entire thing, and I can Dropbox it to any of
you, if you're interested. It contains all of DFW's published short
pieces in their original magazine format (some even in galleys!),
along with a few related essays from various wallace-l people.

In the Wallace community, all gifts of all kinds are received with deep, personal gratitude for
Wallace's work and the people who gather around it.

Lisa D.
Tue Jan 14 04:39:53 UTC 2020

I am not an academic/journalist/writer, have mostly been a lurker . .
. It might seem stalkerish to those who would never be a lurker on a
blog platform, but during years when I didn't always have the time to
contribute or contribute eloquently, I got so so much from being on
the receiving end of this group's intellectual fire power. To be
honest, Wallace-l has been a private intellectual haven in my
otherwise suburban mom existence. I am so grateful to all who have
kept this list going through lean, newsworthy and contentious times.
I understand the lamentations of those who look back to when DFW was
still alive and when more of his writing remained on the horizon, but
seriously, in my view, a living author is not what this list is about
anymore than Jane Austen and Shakespeare societies need their author's
living presence to make their activities relevant. I never read DFW
when he was alive. On this list, the contributors are the collective
carriers of his flame. They make his works burn bright and stay alive.
They mix with his inimitable voice in a crazy cocktail I want to
imbibe posting after posting, digest after digest. Thank you!

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[706] George Carr, 'The Brief Interviews Project', (2007) <http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/the-brief-interviews-project.html> [accessed 21/2/2020].

For fans who are also Wallace scholars, there's gratitude of a particular flavor for the community that sustains, and has an interest in, our field of research. Alex Moran, a fellow board member for the Wallace journal and the DFW Society, wrote:

> My first publication was on *The Pale King*, and I've since helped with the journal. I doubt if I would still be in academia without discovering Wallace. There is also an incredibly supportive community of amazing people who study Wallace. To be blunt, academia is a ludicrous industry, with so few jobs and so many hyper-qualified people for the positions that do become available. The Wallace community is full of people doing things just because they enjoy doing them, with no particular desire to be compensated or to advance their career. Indeed, the journal can often be a time-sink that distracts from career goals. That people do these things just because they love to is consistently refreshing to me, and often reminds me why I study these things—at root, I do quite like books, and this is often forgotten in the mad scramble for employment/publications/money from anyone. Matt Luter and Mike Miley constantly amaze me with what they get done while teaching high school. I am still not quite sure if there is one Matt Bucher or 4, as he seems to get through an inhuman amount of work . . . the DFW community is just a lovely break from all the usual nonsense that surrounds all academic endeavors . . . I have got far more out of studying Wallace than I ever could have imagined: some close friends, publications, a job reviewing new books through Diego for which I will always be grateful, and, in some ways, a (marginal) academic career. As someone with hilariously over-the-top impostor syndrome—my wife still has to reassure me sometimes that they haven't made a mistake awarding me a PhD, or that an email will not be soon in my inbox revoking it—the community has been pretty great for my mental well-being. This is not only because I often get to think "well I'm not as dumb as that guy" (although, admittedly, that is a part of it, as it is with any academic community), but also because of just how generally supportive it is, how inclusive it is, and some of the amazing stuff people have produced over the years.[707]

Likewise, in the afterword to his dissertation on Wallace, the current President of the DFW Society (and member of the journal's editorial team, too) Rob Short wrote:

> In the current market—where finishing a PhD in no way guarantees tenured employment after graduation—I am incredibly grateful for the generosity of time and spirit that I have experienced as a result of my decision to study Wallace. As my defense date approaches, as I look back at those things I helped to bring into the world that will put Wallace's work in front of others and the gratitude I feel at having been allowed to be a part of them affirms the reason I came back to graduate school in the first place. At the end of the day, these connections are what matter most, and they will sustain me.[708]

In choosing to study Wallace and in being involved in the fan community, opportunities and opportunities to give back have presented themselves in equal measure. Like Alex and Rob, I have benefitted professionally and personally from my involvement in this community. This essay is one small attempt to give something back.

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[707] Alexander Moran, 'Personal Correspondence'*,* (2019).
[708] Short, 'Big Books: Addiction and Recovery in the Novels of David Foster Wallace', p. 182.

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There is one specific kind of gift that I'd like to close out this essay on. In 2018 when I was struggling to understand what it meant to want to be a Wallace fan despite his problematic status and the stereotype of his fans, it was this gift that kept me stubbornly attached to both his work and the community around it. In a word, it's the gift of recovery. By 'recovery' I really mean a lot of things— things bundled up with stuff I've already talked about: constructing an identity, finding a sense of belonging and of community, feeling and being unalone, mental wellbeing, gratitude, and so on. But as a convenient catch-all descriptor, 'recovery' will suffice.

In his dissertation, Rob links the gift economy of Wallace fandom with recovery, both literal and metaphorical. Lewis Hyde, aforementioned author of *The Gift*, worked for a time as a counselor to alcoholics.[709] In his book, Hyde 'presents the recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous as a prime example of a "transformative gift," one which must be offered without thought of return'.[710] Rob extends this metaphor to reading Wallace, writing about how *Infinite Jest* has helped others with issues of addiction. He draws on one particular case, from the 2009 'Infinite Summer' group read of *Infinite Jest*. The group read was tracked online as a blog, with participants following a reading schedule and contributing to discussion of the book, sometimes in forums or comments, sometimes in lengthier guest posts. infinitedetox, a participant in the group read, contributed one of these guest posts.

> My name is infinitedetox and I am an addict. Some time around May, 2004, I willfully entered into a relationship with pharmaceutical opiates. It began as a sort of experiment, quickly escalated into a recreation, and from there vectored toward present-day dependency on a straight line whose slope was gradual, but unwavering. In December of last year it became apparent that this line would never flatten out or stabilize on its own, that it would just keep trundling on upwards, tending toward infinity given infinite time. This is when I started to get scared. David Foster Wallace had just passed away and I decided to re-read *Infinite Jest* over the holidays, and something difficult to explain happened to me when I began digging into the book again. Somehow the book–and now brace yourself for one of those clichés that Wallace seems so interested in in *IJ—made me want to be a better person*. And it inspired me to stop taking drugs immediately, to Kick the Bird, via a mechanism which I've had a hard time articulating. Wallace's judgments on addicts and addictions fell upon me with great force, and something about the ferocity of his critique, coupled with his profound compassion and humaneness toward the subject, compelled me to waste absolutely zero time in booting the pills and Getting My Shit Together.[711]

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[709] Short, 'Big Books: Addiction and Recovery in the Novels of David Foster Wallace', p. 177.
[710] Short, 'Big Books: Addiction and Recovery in the Novels of David Foster Wallace', p. 177.
[711] infinitedetox, 'Waving the White Flag: Reading as Rehabilitation', in *Infinite Summer,* (2009).

If that sounds too good to be true, well, yeah maybe. infinitedetox admits that 'the book ended, and vacation along with it. The circumstances of life returned to normal, and life's normal stresses and anxieties returned along with them. I stayed clean for exactly two weeks'. This isn't surprising; backsliding is part and parcel of the recovery process. infinitedetox ends his blog post on a hopeful note: 'here we are: another reading of *Infinite Jest* . . . I've got a good feeling . . . As of this writing I am 10 days, 4 hours and 22 minutes sober . . . But as they say — one day at a time'.[712] We don't know what happened with infinitedetox after that—this participant had their own blog, separate to 'Infinite Summer,' and a Twitter account, but both have been inactive since late 2009. Rob writes that we can't know if reading Wallace really helped this person stay clean; '[t]he veracity of its narrative is one that would certainly strain credulity—if it weren't for so many other similar accounts'.[713]

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Jared B.
Fri Apr 18 16:04:00 CDT 2014

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I then bought IJ and, like a lot of you, it changed me and my life -
both in the small ways and in the big ways. No more amphetamine, for
one thing.
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zengirl
Fri Apr 18 17:33:51 CDT 2014

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[S]topped using [cocaine], found myself in a bookstore in Chicago, saw
IJ and vaguely remembered it had something to do with drugs and
recovery, bought IJ, read IJ, and relied on IJ much more than the Big
Book or the meetings I had started to attend . . . lived the next 15
years or so (during which I read all the rest of DFW), made all sorts
of changes in my life, and lived to tell this silly little tale.
```

Stephen W.
Thu Apr 17 23:34:24 CDT 2014

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10 years ago I was in early recovery and re-starting my reading career
after a drug and alcohol induced hiatus of about 20 years.  Struggled
through the opening parts of IJ, accidentally picked up while browsing
in the local library (wtf *is* this?) until I got to the AA part. And
never looked back.
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Tim L.
Mon Apr 21 17:51:51 CDT 2014

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Reading IJ during the first year of recovery from 20 plus years of
daily alcoholic drinking was revelatory.
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Barbara W.
Sat Apr 19 10:55:00 CDT 2014

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Had a baby in Calfornia and became so emotionally porous . . . all my
thoughts morphed into feelings.
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[712] infinitedetox.

[713] Short, 'Big Books: Addiction and Recovery in the Novels of David Foster Wallace', p. 179.

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David saved my postpartum mind.
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Jeremiah M.
Sat Apr 19 17:31:52 CDT 2014

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The next books to arrive on my doorstep were the works of our man,
DFW, and I read voraciously. When things come into your life they
tend, in retrospect, to come at the exact time you need them to,
really they do.  Within two months I was diagnosed with work related
(Firefighter in a city deluged with violence) Post-Traumatic Stress
Disorder and its obvious partner, Depression, and not the kind fixed
by Prozac. I continued to read DFW, and read and read and read some
more.  And now, today, back to work and participating in a working
marriage while rearing two beautiful girls more like wild monkeys than
princesses, I still read DFW.

Dave was the greatest teacher I've ever had, and I never met him.  . .
. Dave's work was/is a gift.
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Trent C.
Mon Apr 21 12:43:21 CDT 2014

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At the time I started to read IJ my youngest son was just shy of one,
and I was trying a disastrous stint at mostly being a stay at home
dad. For reasons I'm still not entirely sure of, I became very, very
depressed. It's quite possible IJ saved my life. I truly believe
that's not hyperbole.
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In his article 'Death Is Not the End,' John Baskin describes Wallace's legacy as living in and through his connection with his reader.

> For those of us who came of age in the 1990s, his fiction was a relief and a gift . . . Of all the people writing fiction in the Nineties, only Wallace spoke directly to us. His characters, like his readers, were educated, affluent, dissatisfied and lonely . . . Within [*Infinite Jest*], the variously damaged characters turn to the common cultural palliatives: drugs, sports, entertainment, therapy—as well as what are familiar resources for Wallace's readers: cynicism, theory, avant-garde art. Through this maze of failures some are led to AA, while others go quietly insane or kill themselves with ghastly creativity. These "others" are privileged and suffering intellectuals like Hal and his father. For them, and readers like them, Wallace's sincere prescription is the novel itself. The father's failed communication with his son, the film "Infinite Jest," is transformed into what the author hoped would be a successful communication with his readers: the novel, *Infinite Jest*.[714]

That readers have such an intimate relationship with Wallace's work and, to whatever imagined or real degree, with Wallace himself, is in part because Wallace's work 'actively courts an affective response'.[715] We can get into a whole thing about authorial intentions, but the scholarly consensus on

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[714] Jon Baskin, 'Death Is Not the End: David Foster Wallace: His Legacy and His Critics', *The Point Magazine,* (2009) <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/death-is-not-the-end/> [accessed 21/2/2020].
[715] Kathleen Fitzpatrick, 'Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network', in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace,* ed. by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), (p. 186).

Wallace—one he encouraged in various interviews—is that he believed in the writer-reader relationship. He believed in communicating with his reader, and his work was an attempt to make this connection successfully.[717] For many Wallace fans, he managed to do that just fine.

Maria B.
Fri Jan 10 00:51:31 UTC 2020

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A fan, no, a comrade in arms. I think Wallace in particular made his
readers feel this way. Or maybe a lot of people this way about the
writers who mean the most to us, alive or dead, they're like
companions or friends.
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While the writer-reader relationship may be imagined, Wallace's work did enable real relationships between his readers who, to purloin Maria's phrase, are more than fans—they are comrades in arms.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, a former colleague of Wallace's, explores in her analysis of both *Infinite Jest* and 'Infinite Summer' the potential for Wallace's novel to create empathy between the reader, the writer, and the text (as with the already-mentioned stories of recovery) as well as creating empathy among a community of readers. But she has her reservations about this. I will not do Fitzpatrick's argument justice here, so I'd encourage you to seek out her chapter in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, for the full scope of her argument. In brief, though, Fitzpatrick cautions that when we too-readily read ourselves into a work, we identify in a way that risks being totally self-absorbed. Relating this to something like Oprah's Book Club, with its focus on 'often treacly notions of personal redemption and the overcoming of obstacles' through reading, Fitzpatrick suggests that we cultivate 'a form of reading that privileges romantic, and even narcissistic, forms of imaginative identification, in encouraging its audience to understand the narratives of others as object lessons for themselves'.[718]

When I read this, I felt deeply uncomfortable not only about my own reading-as-recovery story, but also about all the others that had circulated in the community. We should, as readers, resist the temptation to find everything 'relatable,' as though the only point of reading is to recognise ourselves in that reading and confirm our worldview (this kind of identification may account for the demographic of many Wallace fans, and likely contributes to the whiteness, for example, of our community). But what saves, I think, a lot of the stories that emerge in the Wallace community is precisely this community. Sympathising with a text because it speaks to our experience, or because it allows us to easily project our own experiences onto that text, is the first step towards a more ethical form of identification—the kind that makes us more aware of others. Fitzpatrick writes that '[f]or this reason, 'the form of identification promoted by the book club should not be dismissed as mere bad faith'.[719] So what does this mean for the Wallace crowd and the gift of recovery? Fitzpatrick argues

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[717] See for example: Clare Hayes-Brady's chapter '"Something to Do with Love": Writing and the Process of Communication' in her monograph *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (2016).
[718] Fitzpatrick, pp. 190-91.
[719] Fitzpatrick, pp. 190-91.

that a more ethical form of empathic identification can be witnessed in the 'Infinite Summer' reading group. She says that a novel like *Infinite Jest* has the ability to transcend 'essentialist notions of identity'[720] and create pathways for 'ethical, empathic connection not just between reader and writer, or between reader and text, but among readers'.[721] In other words, Wallace's work begins with the writer-reader relationship, but it also opens up and out into a larger community of readers.

'Infinite Summer' was launched by Matthew Baldwin in June 2009. Baldwin had tried but not managed to finish *Infinite Jest,* and he hoped that by making the reading a structured and collective process, through a reading schedule and by creating a public forum for readers to communicate with each other, the support would be there for people to complete the novel.[722] On June 4, Baldwin blogged about the community that was already being formed around the project.[723] The group read had been picked up by various press outlets, the Facebook group had almost 2000 members, on Twitter #infsum was highly active, and communities for the group read had been set up across platforms like LiveJournal, Shelfari, and Goodreads. Other participating bloggers would be providing accounts of their reading experience on their own blogs, too, increasing the spread of the network of communities involved.[724] Fitzpatrick writes that the architecture of the blog was important for participants in 'Infinite Summer,' as they 'used reading and discussing *Infinite Jest* as a pretext for their own writing, about their lives, their thoughts, their struggles'.[725] She cites the example of the aforementioned blogger, infinitedetox, and their reading-as-recovery experience. Fitzpatrick notes that infinitedetox connects 'the kind of self-surrender that Wallace suggests makes twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous work to that required of the reader of a big novel such as *Infinite Jest*'.[726] This kind of self-surrender 'is not a passive submission but an active engagement of reader with the text's perspective, a giving over of the self to the preoccupations of another mind'.[727] Fitzpatrick says this kind of reading lays the groundwork for an 'empathic engagement with the text,'[728] rather than simple identification, although she remains cautious about the power of transference and how infinitedetox may be mistaking a text about 'the struggle with addiction for the struggle itself'.[729] In the end, though, infinitedetox is a good example for how a project like 'Infinite Summer' provided infinitedetox 'with both the impetus for a return to the novel and its perspective, as well as a venue for the kind of safe, anonymous sharing that AA inspires'.[730]

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[720] Fitzpatrick, p. 186.
[721] Fitzpatrick, p. 183.
[722] Fitzpatrick, p. 192.
[723] Matthew Baldwin, 'The Community', in *Infinite Summer,* (2009).
[724] Baldwin.
[725] Fitzpatrick, p. 194.
[726] Fitzpatrick, p. 194.
[727] Fitzpatrick, p. 194.
[728] Fitzpatrick, pp. 194-95.
[729] Fitzpatrick, p. 195.
[730] Fitzpatrick, p. 195.

Fitzpatrick says the dynamic and architecture of the Wallace community transforms a story like infinitedetox's into a one-to-many gift. The writing that was shared through 'Infinite Summer' 'wasn't just shouting into the void, and it wasn't just the kinds of self- absorbed rambling critics often associate with personal blogs. The public, open nature of the group and the kinds of sharing that it produced,' she continues, 'reveal the degree to which AA, blogs, and *Infinite Jest* all present an opportunity to build empathic relations with others, transforming self-expression into a generous mode of Giving It Away that, like Wallace's novel, creates the possibility of connection for other readers'.[731]

I think this is the point I've also been trying to make. Wallace's work seems to attract a particular kind of reader. We can focus on the demographics of that reader—white, privileged, middle-class, educated, male—and suggest that Wallace's work excludes others (a claim that's hardly baseless but one that I argue is not entirely fair, either), but we can also focus on the reader's emotional relationship to the text. And though this won't be true for all readers of Wallace, there's enough anecdotal evidence to suggest, emphatically, that Wallace's work succeeds at talking about issues of mental health and succeeds in providing readers with an unexpected source of support for their wellbeing. This is only amplified when that reader goes beyond the text and joins the larger Wallace community where, beyond research that shows how being a member of a fandom can improve mental wellbeing, the Wallace community comprises people who've attached to the work specifically because of its importance to their mental health. As Fitzpatrick says of the 'Infinite Summer' community, it's about more than getting the right text in front of the right readers—this community connected 'the right readers with one another'.[732]

When we talk about how reading can train us to be more empathetic, it's like, yeah, but. Most of us read, consciously or unconsciously, to find ourselves and to make sense of our experience of the world. But even if the way we initially identify with our reading is narcissistic, engaging with stories told by others in order to understand something about our own lives can also be the starting point for empathetic recognition of others.[733] And when we broaden this out to reading communities, there is great potential to create a social space for this empathy, where competing interpretations of texts and communal discussion foster, ideally, an openness to other people.[734] Furthermore, these kinds of communal reading experiences, where discussions aren't 'just between author and reader but among readers, can help those readers not just to feel "less alone inside" but in fact to *be* less alone in the world as well'.[735]

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[731] Fitzpatrick, p. 196.
[732] Fitzpatrick, p. 197.
[733] Fitzpatrick, p. 198.
[734] Fitzpatrick, p. 200.
[735] Fitzpatrick, p. 201.

Daniel J.
Sun Jan 12 23:29:37 UTC 2020

I'd like to take a brief (for me) stab at this just in order to say
that, honestly, wallace-l has been amongst the things I would count as
having saved my life.

I don't mean this in an overly dramatic suicidal ideation sort of way,
but instead the members of the list encouraged me directly and
indirectly, to get my life a bit more together and showed empathy and
understanding while I was in a bad way.

Other pieces of wisdom from the people here have been kept by me and
have changed my life.

The thing about congregating around finishing a book that is hard on
multiple levels and still intrinsically humanist, is that one finds
only interesting people amongst its fans. Setting aside how
accomplished wallace-l-ers tend to be (there are many more graduate
degrees than people here, I would bet), they are also smart, sweet,
persistent and funny enough to get the sometimes dry humor of the
novel. As I live in what could [be] derisively labeled "the sticks" of
Pennsylvania . . . it is not at all impossible that I would have
literally never met a single person in life who loved the books I did.
After stumbling across the list after a mention in a newsgroup, I knew
I'd found something special. My first 6 months I just lurked in awe of
all of the big brains on the list. That they were willing to read
anything I ever wrote or answer specific questions still astonishes me
with its kindness. And a couple of decades later, I am still in awe of
the big brains on people. They make Mensa meetings look like the
Burger King break room, and I've spent time at all of these. And the
people have made me comfortable enough that any time I had a
philosophical thought about art, I could come here and talk it out.
And inevitably learn a lot and thrill to the fact that other people
have thought similarly to me, and also more and better about those
topics. It makes one a lot less lonely to have this available when one
doesn't have anybody in real life to talk to about, say, whether the
word "oriental" is racist (this was 15 years ago.)

To make a broad generalization, at this point, I'm a much bigger fan
of the people of Wallace-l than I am of nearly any living writer. I've
probably read a hundred thousand words written by several of them at
least, and specific writing about DFW is not in the majority of it.
There is a wide variety of specializations and professions, not to
mention the polymaths. There's been such a long correspondence
(through so many changes in circumstance) that I feel like I've grown
up with some of the members moreso than those I went to high-school
with. I still think of the list as currently constituted with
fondness, of specific members happily and frequently when they pop up
in my facebook or twitter feeds (and you really couldn't do much
better than to have feeds entirely constituted by the members and
alumni of this list), and every so often I remember and mourn some of
the members we lost over the decades as well as wonder what happened
to several others. And I can honestly say I still feel the tension of
wanting to write well more for this list than writing for literally
any other audience. Not that that helps, obvs.

Prabhakar R.
Mon Jan 13 00:00:36 UTC 2020

Unlurking briefly (though I was *very* active on this list back in the
day) to second what Dan has written . . . When my marriage abruptly
imploded a decade ago, it was to friends made on wallace-l that I
first turned. I would have gotten through it regardless, but they

helped immensely. And while I don't want to go into details, I believe
that at another time and in other circumstances, at least one life was
saved (though not on-list).

Brad R.
Tue Jan 14 05:55:00 UTC 2020

It was 1996. I hoped to cease to be. I did not wish to kill or hurt
myself - I just wished to stop. I took my futon couch apart, laying
the mattress on the floor, assembled my things (two bags of Milano
cookies and a portable transistor radio) and after tuning the radio to
WFAN, lay down and waited for the end to begin.

Noises and lights went past my fourth-floor West Village walk-up, but
I was focused on the immaterial.

Six days later, after it became clear that I would not cease, I
thought: What would keep me here? Why should I reinvest in life? I had
no answer for the second, but to the first I thought "A book! I will
have to stay alive to find out what happens. So, it should be a work
of fiction." A voice in my head added that the longer the book the
better chance I had of getting out of whatever this feeling was.

I walked down the four flights and to a little bookstore near Bleeker
and Christopher. I asked them for the thickest fiction book they had,
and they handed me a copy of INFINITE JEST.

Upon returning home, I lay back down on my futon, opening the book
above my head. That first sentence: "I am in here", reduced me to
sobs.

I gorged myself on that book. I swam in it, I gobbled it up, I was
drowned by it more than once -but I kept on. I was so hungry for
contact – human contact - nonjudgmental human contact- that I think I
read maybe every fourth word that time through. It wasn't literature,
it was sustenance.

My roommate was working at Autonomedia and doing things I frankly
didn't understand. He had a thing called THING and that thing had a
site on the world wide web that needed traffic. (Huh?) Putting aside
my immediate question of why webs would need traffic, I booted up my
Performa 6400 and went to a site called thing.net. Thing.net had the
first hyperlink I had ever seen. However, being the thingiest thing to
ever thing, there was no indication as to where the link went. Rather,
it was just a blinking blue line. I clicked it, and eventually (28.8
modem, amirite?) I landed on a website called waste.org (which I later
learned was run by the same folx.) Navigating my cursor around
waste.org, I clicked on something that showed me two listservs --
Pynchon-l and Wallace-l.

I joined them both, but felt quite overnatched by the Pynchon folx. It
took a few days to realize that the David Foster Wallace of the list
was the same one that wrote the book that kept me on the planet -
because, well, who else would want to read something I liked?

And then, suddenly, my father died. Like any good Jewish boy / only
child, I gave up the apartment and moved home. My mother was in
really rough shape, and she didn't want to be left alone - but it was
OK because I had friends to get me through it. There was Matt, and
David, and Brooks, and Maria and Marie, and (was it JJ?) and Greg,
and . . . While stage managing what turned out to be a funeral with
600 attendees, and trying to take care of a very distraught mom, this
list was my refuge - where I could read and think and be one of the
cool kids for a change. It also kept me going, because my mind had to
be wearing its Sunday best everytime I responded to one of these fine
folks. I've never met any of them in person, and I don't know that I
want to, because they are all so vibrant in my mind.

Tomas L.
Mon Apr 21 20:27:50 CDT 2014

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Joined wallace-l in 2007 or so. Was crucial in getting me through a
horrid bout of depression that lasted from 2008 to 2010. The second,
lesser, one was 2011-2013---again the listserv rocked. Wallace-l aided
my way of thinking and provided support in the toughest times (October
2008 would have been insurmountable without you).
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uglatto
Mon Apr 21 19:09:59 CDT 2014

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Throughout the years this list and the people on it have helped me
through bad times and good, through addiction, loneliness, illness and
recovery. The support I had here even helped me come out as a
crossdresser a few years back. It's an amazing place and I'm really
honored to know so many of you.
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hunter
Wed Jan 15 21:52:43 UTC 2020

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On Twitter, there's a constant running joke/gag/meme that says like
"the real X was the friends we made along the way." But honestly,
that's kind of how I feel about wallace-l. It sounds cheesy, like a
Hallmark movie type thing but maybe that's fitting considering the
overall theme of the AA sections of Infinite Jest.

As great as DFW's work is for me (IJ has very much helped me in
recovery) this list might end up making just as much of an impact of
my life. It's not necessarily the thing itself but the connections
that I've made here. I have come to know of so many people that I
wouldn't have come across if it weren't for other people coming here
eager to talk about his work. And I think that's a powerful thing and
maybe it's rather ironic, I guess, since his work is about being
trapped in one's own head but maybe that was what he was trying to do
with his Project: make one feel less alone. I know he tried to pretend
this list didn't exist, but I hope he would appreciate the results.
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As part of a larger argument about scholarly and 'naïve' reading, Fitzpatrick makes the point that there's 'a vital importance' for literary scholars to develop 'a genuine—even *empathetic*—understanding of the ways that popular readers read, and why'.[736] Fitzpatrick says 'there is crucial work to be done in exploring how a book connects with its readers, why those readers form an affective relationship with that book, and how those readers connect with one another through the medium of the book'.[737] Though she writes this mainly in relation to the future of literary culture and literary studies, I think it applies more broadly to how we understand something like fandom—especially, in this case, Wallace fandom.

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[736] Fitzpatrick, p. 202.
[737] Fitzpatrick, p. 202.

In an interview for *The Nation,* Hanif Abdurraqib, author of *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest*, writes about the 'exhausting question of separating the art from the artist'.[738] He describes the argument for this separation as really being a request for absolution by fans, so they can feel okay about continuing to love what they've discovered is problematic. Abdurraqib says that our nostalgia for the object of our affection 'can train a person to imagine that their brightest and most beautiful moments only have a single soundtrack'.[739] Despite my obvious sentimentality, I have a low tolerance for nostalgia. I don't yearn for a time pre-2012 when Wallace was 'Saint Dave' and could do no wrong. Anyway, Wallace fans still had to contend with their bad reputation way before that ship sailed. Holding Wallace fandom in some static heyday benefits nobody. The political responsibility of a fan, Abdurraqib says, is to challenge that nostalgia, that memory, and our attachments. It is the responsibility of fans to

> love themselves more than they love their icons. To love themselves even more than they love their memories, and to love the evolution of all those things in harmony: the evolution of themselves, the evolution of their memory, and the evolution of the artist—for better or worse.[740]

What keeps me optimistic about the Wallace community is that we have evolved. We aren't only 'open to' change—we're actively taking steps to move forward in an ethical and progressive way. But in our current cultural moment, with our appetite for cancelling or refusing anything we take moral issue with, there seem to be limited options—options that themselves feel limited to moving on, rather than forward. Either you reduce complicated situations to back and white moral thinking and, following this train of thought to its logical conclusion, condemn and reject wholesale whatever it is you've decided is objectionable. Or you take the 'problematic fave' route, kind of acknowledging the problem, offering a caveat or two, and in doing so making it okay to continue loving the thing that's problematic (for someone like Wallace—popular but still obscure enough and, since it makes a difference, dead—this kind of reconciliation is more possible, and more likely to fly under the radar). For both options, if you wait long enough, sometimes things just go back to the status quo anyway.

Or maybe that's me being reductive. It's hard to know if I'm overreacting or underreacting to all of what's happened with Wallace's legacy in the last decade. The cynical part of me thinks it mustn't matter all that much if, only two years after his embroilment in #MeToo, Wallace's problematic status can be compartmentalized and we can carry on reading and teaching and fanning over his work, with the occasional person asking, 'wasn't he an abuser?'. The hopeful part of me thinks progress is slow and steady (sometimes seemingly invisible and sometimes going through backslides, kind of like recovery), but it's still progress. And maybe progress should be slow, when as

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[738] Abdurraqib.
[739] Abdurraqib.
[740] Abdurraqib.

a culture we're constantly being invited to react and give our hot take. For my part, I hope taking the time to reckon with Wallace can contribute to much bigger and more ambitious social change.

My motivation behind writing about Wallace and the community is itself changing. I thought, when I started this project, that I wanted to pull Wallace, and his legacy, out of these uncomfortable conversations. I wanted to find a safe spot for his work (and, by extension, his fans), that'd justify my own investment in him, and them. But that's no longer what I want at all. Pulling Wallace out of uncomfortable conversations isn't much different from making him irrelevant—in a way, we should be grateful for the anti-fans who inadvertently give him cultural airtime. If Wallace becomes obscure, then so too does the potential value of reading his work and the potential value of the community of readers who find each other through his work—a value I hope I've managed to communicate to you in this essay. Obscurity is as much a death knell as rejection. So there is no obvious answer, no acceptable solution, in a situation like this. Not for me, anyway. And more and more I think that's the point; I don't think there ought to be a clear answer (maybe this isn't the epiphany I think it is, but it's what I've arrived at). We should keep the tension that's there, between a person who we might object to on moral grounds, but whose work has also had demonstrated positive and ethical value for his fans—fans who pay that gift forward and who are, as much as his work and as much as his biography, in my opinion, and for better or worse, Wallace's legacy. There's something here. I don't want you to look away, I want you to look closer.

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