

Pluralism and Pathology in Afro- and Native American Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Racism has been figured as a uniquely insidious and American disease by some of the most controversial writers and scholars in American history. Ralph Ellison famously compared it to the genetic condition known as vitiligo in the epilogue of *Invisible Man*, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan likened it to a virus running roughshod through the bloodstream of the body politic in his infamous report. Yet few have deployed this rich and historically resonate trope to the effect achieved by John Edgar Wideman in his short story “Fever” (1989). The story chronicles the work of a fictionalized version of the African Methodist Episcopalian founder, Bishop Richard Allen, during one of the deadliest episodes in Philadelphia’s history: twin outbreaks of dengue and yellow fever that killed nearly one-fifth of the city’s population in 1793. An itinerant preacher temporarily turned surgeon’s apprentice, Allen refutes the medical establishment’s claims that the pestilence is spread by asymptomatic African immigrants, slaves, and freemen by avowing that the fever treats all Philadelphians, white and black, alike. For Allen, this exposes the “ironical knot” that lay at the center of the epidemic: African Americans were

proclaimed carriers of the fever and treated as pariahs, but when it became expedient to command our services to nurse the sick and bury the dead, the previous allegations were no longer mentioned. Urged on by desperate counselors, the mayor granted us a blessed immunity. We were ordered to save the city. (141)

There are two levels of irony at play in this pithy passage. The first, of course, is the contradiction that emerges as the black community, formerly perceived as a threat to the health of the city, is reconfigured as its only hope for salvation. The second level is revealed in the legal etymology of the medical term. The black community is declared immune—or exempt from duty

or obligation—to the colonial Code Noir at the very moment they are pressed involuntarily into service.

By explicitly connecting the body that is inured against attack to a legal entity free from constraint and revealing that the black community is immune in neither sense of the term, Wideman raises the specter of a double betrayal, an injustice perpetrated by the yoking of nominal freedoms to fictive impenetrability. I submit that this dual disingenuity is reference to both the commodification and hyper-circulation minority cultures suffer under the influence of neoliberalism as well as its cure, the return more salubrious ancestral cultural values touted by postnationalist scholars. The wrapping of a legal fiction within a corporeal one is no mere accident. Rather, Wideman's use of the pathological body is an important literary device, one that reveals and magnifies the contradictions and complications inherent in both neoliberal cultural politics as well as the therapeutic discourses deployed to resist them.

This dissertation examines American literature through the lens Wideman has so astutely crafted here—the articulation of corporeal disease and discrimination—in literary and cultural production of the late-twentieth and early-twenty first century. It is particularly interested in the prevalence of illness in Afro- and Native American novels published after the radical ethnic nationalist movements of the 1960s and 70s had faded, and the ways in which such sickly identities appear as alternatives to conventional models of communal affiliation and organizing. This postnationalist period is a rich one to consider because—even as minority communities were bolstered by the proliferation of racially liberal reforms—they were confronted by unprecedented challenges attending the rise of neoliberal economic policies.

I argue that, not only did the drive to deregulate and privatize resource distribution immediately begin to reverse the gains made by the Civil Rights and Self-Determination movements, but that neoliberalism did so by repurposing and rearticulating a core contradiction created within and sustained by racially liberal discourses. This contradiction can be traced to a

shift in the national discourse on race that arose after the Second World War, a transition that was characterized by two principal tenets: the 1) substitution of culture for race as the foundation of minority group identity and 2) the installation of the pursuit of cultural diversity at the heart of democratic politics. Laudible as this terminological turn to culture was, it retained vestiges of earlier racist paradigms. That is, even though physical, phenotypical traits were denounced as the primary *source* of collective belonging, the body was simultaneously retained as the *site* for identification because racist logics of heritability and homogeneity were applied to discourses of cultural difference. If scientific racism saw the body as the ultimate instrument for determining racial identity, after the cultural turn the body was imbued with a new ambivalence, as corporeality continued to augment and shape notions of cultural reproduction, transmission, and mutation. This meant that following the Civil Rights reforms of mid-century figurations of culture were also freighted with ambivalence. The elevation and celebration of cultural beliefs, values and practices served as both the means of redressing *and* secreting racial inequalities; paradoxically advocating minority cultural inclusion in national discourses while obscuring the unabated political and economic exclusion of ethno-racial minorities.

This dissertation offers a historicized, comparativist account of how Afro- and Native American texts have ventilated the paradoxical status of culture that emerged in the postnationalist period, and how this task hinges upon tropes of disease and pathology. These literary traditions, though differently affected by the twin genocides that facilitated the formation of the United States and enabled its vast accumulation of wealth, were nevertheless buffeted by the same storms as discourses of racial and ethnic difference were shaped and reshaped from the colonial period to the present.¹ In particular, American Indian and African American

¹ Groundbreaking research by Native American historian and author Jack Forbes (Renápe/Lenape) in the 1980s has established that terms like mulatto, black, pardo, and negro were applied indiscriminately to all non-whites from the sixteenth century onward in the Americas and particularly the United States, obscuring a long and rich history of American and African interchanges that occurred before, during, and after European conquest. Forbes has suggested that this terminological confusion often meant the laws and statutes intended to restrain one ethnic group often ended up impacting

communities in the United States share complexly fraught relationships to blood and blood quantum, as the expression of visibly recognizable, phenotypical traits have long been inversely correlated with citizenship, civil liberties, and basic human rights. To combat this reductive configuration of collective identity, Native- and African American texts explored forms of belonging that were more contingent, mobile, and malleable. This often emerged as tropes of illness or spells of sickness that left their victims with greater insight and new, unusual allies.

It would be a grave disservice to the diversity of ethnic, economic, linguistic, historical, and national differences that comprise African American and Native American communities to suggest that the two are intrinsically isomorphic, or even that each itself functions as a homogenous whole (as the network of over 566 federally-recognized Native American Nations can attest). However, my comparativist project draws support from how the public perception of Native- and African American rights movements began to align and rhyme from mid-century onwards. For instance, the sense of African Americans and Native Americans as a national minority grew as pan-ethnic national organizations formed in the early twentieth century (like the NAACP, the National Urban League and the Society of American Indians) began rapidly expanding in the 1940s. This occurred after the Great Depression prompted mass migrations and reformations in both urban and rural areas, after conditions of extreme poverty were shared by many Americans on an unprecedented scale, when the prosperity following World War II was discovered not to have been shared by all. This burgeoning sense of dissonance between the fight for democracy against nationalist socialism and communism abroad and the fight against minorities at home fueled mainstream support for racial reforms. Under this new domestic and global alignment racism went from being an unfortunate error to a pathogen threatening the

the others as well. Also, a brief note on the designation of tribal affiliation in this dissertation: in Native American Studies, it is customary to list an individual's tribal affiliation (when it is known) in parenthesis following their name; and where multiple heritages are specified, both tribes are listed with a slash in between (as seen above following Forbes' name). Though parentheticals can feel a little bulky, this is preferable to dismissing the complex and rich array of Native American nations who dwell in North America. Heritage and tribal enrollment, however, ought not be confused with professional field of study, which is noted in adjectival form.

entire American body politic.² Once racial inequality was reconceived as a threat to democracy itself, the Native- and African American struggles against termination and Jim Crow (respectively) gained broad popular support. Calls for Red and Black Power erupted in 1966, and radical nationalist movements emerged to push moderate reforms further, to consider economic redistribution, self-determination, and local autonomy.³ The result was that in between 1957 and 1968 Congress passed six Civil Rights Acts (the first such legislation approved since the Reconstruction) followed by the American Indian Self-Determination, Religious Freedom, and Child Welfare Acts from 1975 to 1978.

Yet groundbreaking and unprecedented as these reforms were, the gains achieved were neither comprehensive nor unassailable. In many Native- and African American communities, the impact of the above political reforms was mitigated and stalled by worsening economic conditions in the late 1970s and 80s, as political and class fragmentation grew. Though throughout the postnationalist period the rhetoric of an intractable underclass was applied to shame and pathologize both Native- and African American constituencies, and the Millennium Breach report identified these communities as facing similarly severe forms of

² Critic Jodi Melamed's reading of this period in her work *Represent and Destroy* connects sociologists Omi and Winant's reading of the "racial break" in the mid-1940s to the emergence of racial capitalism or neoliberal multiculturalism. Melamed argues that historically, the redefinition of collective identity in terms of culture instead of race was part of an antiracist, multicultural discourse that served to legitimate the United States' prominence in the geopolitical arena following World War II. Adopting the cultural inclusion of minorities as a tenet of American national ideology mitigated Soviet critiques that capitalist democracies as predicated on institutionalized racism, and demonstrated that the modern capitalist state was not reliant on the forms of racial oppression that sustained older, colonial forms capitalism. This suturing of multiculturalism to American national identity legitimated U.S. geopolitical power, a union which, according to Melamed, "manages, develops, and depoliticizes capitalism by collapsing it with Americanism [and] results in a situation where 'official' antiracist discourse and politics actually limit awareness of global capitalism" ("The Spirit of Neoliberalism" 6).

³ As I will discuss shortly, nationalism took different forms in Native American and African American communities. Nationalist sentiment, broadly defined as the sense of the minority community is culturally distinct from the mainstream in the United States and ought to be politically separate as well, was not new, but in the mid-1960s it was closely associated with radical activism in both Black America and Indian Country. The key difference was that the tribes had long been acknowledged to be sovereign entities capable of self-governance, and the tools to realize this political sovereignty had technically already been accorded to them following the Self-Determination Act of 1975. As I will describe in more detail later, tribal self-determination was hamstrung the same way African American Civil Rights reforms were: egalitarian gestures were kept from instantiating real reform and redistribution by a complex array of federalist challenges, bureaucratic red tape, and renewed racial revanchism.

disenfranchisement,⁴ typically scholars in each field have treated the denigration of racially liberal reforms as separate and unrelated phenomena. Yet although working in isolation, many of these ethnic literary and cultural scholars parsed the same strange polarities in minority communities: a disjunction between increased political representation and reduced social parity, between multicultural inclusion and economic exclusion, and between the fate of leaders and the fate of the masses. Several prominent critics have traced this impasse to the denaturing of politics by the vacuous aesthetics of the postmodern, or the hollowing out of democratic institutions by neoliberal economic policies, or the commodification of the bodies, stories, and symbols of ethnic otherness to supply new multicultural forms of conspicuous consumption—yet little consensus has emerged except that of an intractable crisis. The overriding sense is that racial inequality is not just a “peculiar institution” that threatens the American body politic, but rather a retrovirus twisted into the strands of our national DNA, waiting for the opportune moment to erupt and corrupt again.

I. Pathology and the Postnationalist Trifecta

Yet, for all this emphasis laid on disease when pursuing the cure for neoliberal multiculturalism, what ironically has not been accounted for is the prominent use of pathological motifs and metaphors in Afro- and Native American literature that plumbs the ongoing, systemic inequities of the postnationalist era. In fiction from African American authors like John Edgar Wideman and Native American novelist Louise Erdrich (*Turtle Mountain Ojibwe*), for instance, racism is represented not as a single disease or epidemic attacking the minority community, but rather as a systemic, chronic condition sparked by the initial invasion of the host. It is this notion

⁴ Conducted on the thirty-year anniversary of the Kerner Commission report from 1968, the Millennium Report found that the country had actually grown further apart in terms of wealth and race in the postnationalist period. This report has demonstrated that the period following the decline of radical nationalist movements in the early 1970s saw the drastic increase in income disparity, childhood poverty, and incarceration in all minority communities within the United States.

of a battle constantly refought, but never won, of the self defending itself from an enemy within, of identity in chronic conflict, that I wish to highlight in my readings of postnationalist ethnic American fiction.

Instead of reacting to the cultural and political representation crises engineered by neoliberalism with an attempt to recuperate a therapeutic model of the minority community from the past, I argue that certain Native American and African American fiction turned to figurations of pathology to parse the difficulties facing minority communities in the postnationalist period. For instance, Erdrich's third novel *Tracks* (1988) hinges upon a moment in which a tribal elder named Nanapush, advises his adopted daughter Fleur through a string of crises that have followed in the wake of a tuberculosis epidemic in 1918: the loss of her second child in a dangerous third-trimester miscarriage; the near-death of her first born; and the news that she will soon lose her family's allotment on the reservation unless she manages to raise the fee money in time. Nanapush advises Fleur to remember that

[p]ower dies, power goes under and gutters out, ungraspable. It is momentary, quick of flight and liable to deceive. As soon as you rely on the possession it is gone. Forget that it ever existed, and it returns. I never made the mistake of thinking that I owned my own strength, that was my secret. And so I never was alone in my failures. I was never to blame entirely when all was lost, when my desperate cures had no effect on the suffering of those I loved....I told this to Fleur that same day [...but] I saw the barrier of her obstinate pride had kept my words safely beyond belief. In her mind she was huge, she was endless. There was no room for the failures of anyone else. At the same time, she was the funnel of our history. As the lone survivor of the Pillagers, she staggered now beneath the burden of a life she was failing to deserve. (177-8)

Fleur ultimately cannot accept his counsel, however, because she once commanded respect and awe as a descendant of the Pillagers, a clan famous for their spiritual and martial prowess.⁵

Pivoting as the novel does around this plea from one leader to another—to embrace an ethos of

⁵ The Pillagers are known to have orchestrated one of the last successful Indian uprisings against federal troops in 1898, the Battle of Sugar Point, where they were outnumbered three to one. For more, read Gerald Vizenor's account in *Bear Island*. Also known as the Ojibwe or Chippewa, the Anishinaabeg (singular Anishinaabe) were based in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan during the colonial period before forced to move westward at the end of the 18th century.

collectivity and abjure individual power in a time of unprecedented assault against tribal sovereignty⁶ —Fleur’s predicament in *Tracks* echoes many of the challenges facing nationalist leadership during the postnationalist period as well.

The passage above is significant because it outlines what a successful tribal leader should do to survive such times of communal crisis. Fleur’s mistake, as Nanapush suggests, is that she believes herself to be the principal, and not the medium, of the supernatural powers she interacts with. The irony is that even as Fleur sees herself as a being with immense capabilities, the rest of the community views her as an important channel for metaphysical energy. Yet although Nanapush clearly finds Fleur’s delusions of grandeur to be erroneous, in the final lines of the passage he seems to suggest that serving as a conduit for power is an equally burdensome position. It seems that Nanapush, himself a shaman whose powers have also been severely taxed by the same hardships that have beset the entire community, has found the only tenable position: neither limitless nor hollow, infallible nor funnel. Yet exactly what such a leadership position does entail is murky. Nanapush spends more time relating what a proper leader should not be, rather than delineating what one *should* be: he repeatedly tells his audience what he has never done or been, but can offer no positive examples. This trend of defining himself through the negative permeates the novel on a structural level as well, as Nanapush and the novel’s second narrator, another young Métis shaman named Pauline Puyat, seek to aid, guide, and influence Fleur by discrediting each other in alternating chapters. A traditionalist and an accommodationist, respectively, Nanapush and Pauline represent opposing responses to the various crises that sweep

⁶ Set in the Allotment Era (1887-1934), Fleur’s tale is one that was repeated throughout Indian Country as over ninety million acres (or just over two-thirds) were stolen from individuals who could not come up with the tax payments necessary to retain their individual allotments of reservation land. The legislation that spurred this enormous divestment, the Dawes Act, was the most powerful attack made against tribal sovereignty in the twentieth century, and it was explicitly aimed at ending tribal political and economic collectivity in an attempt to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream society. The land grab intensified in 1912, the year in which Erdrich’s novel commences. Twenty-five years after the passage of Dawes, 1912 marked the first year in which Indians who’d been granted allotments could be deemed competent enough to bear all the privileges, and responsibilities, of full citizenship. This meant that 1912 was the first year in which taxes were levied against many individuals’ allotments, and therefore the first year many Anishinaabe went into arrears.

the reservation—epidemics of tuberculosis, influenza, and social diseases like alcoholism, poverty, and domestic abuse—yet both fail in their separate quests to unite the community and to keep Fleur within its fold.

Nanapush's and Pauline's unsuccessful struggle to guide Fleur, and to direct the flow of history that she represents, evinces a keen interest in the role played by minority leadership within the postnationalist era. In so doing, the novel critiques not individual acts but the cultural logic—a nostalgic and essentialist historicism—prized by postnationalist elites who rose to prominence following the uneven implementation of Civil Rights reforms and the decline of radical nationalist movements.

Like *Tracks*, Wideman's short story "Fever" likewise strove to understand the challenges to minority leadership under neoliberal multiculturalism by way of pathology. The exigencies of the epidemic in "Fever" partly dissolved discriminatory social practices that typically confined Bishop Allen and his parishioners to live in the poorer area near the riverfront and to labor in dangerous and underpaid professions. For instance, once he begins collaborating with the famed Dr. Rush, Allen circulates far more broadly than a freed slave would have been able to in the late eighteenth century: collaborating with whites, blacks and immigrants; appearing at the bedsides of the rich as well as the poor; and offering his services to indigents and social scions alike. Everywhere around him Allen observes the dissolution of other more durable forms of segregation as all the concrete structures that serve to uphold and buttress social discrimination start to disintegrate. The homes and the neighborhoods formerly closed to him, formerly defined by their exclusivity, are now opened. As the narrator notes:

Something in the bricks, mortar, beams and stones had gone soft, had lost its permanence. When [Allen] entered sickrooms, walls fluttered, floors buckled. ... Membranes that preserved the integrity of substances and shapes, kept each in its proper place, were worn thin. He could poke his finger through yellowed skin. A stone wall. The eggshell of his skull. What should be separated was running together. Threatened to burst. Nothing contained the way it was supposed to be. No clear lines of demarcation. A mongrel city. (135)

Just as the short, staccato sentences demand to be read together, so too do the physical structures they describe—in which property is privatized and segregation made manifest—begin to melt and intermingle in Allen’s Philadelphia, taking on unexpected lives of their own. The bodies that were once phenotypically marked as white or black are now swollen and blurred at their edges, unrecognizable and undifferentiated now as victims of the plague, which treats all alike.

Implicitly, the outbreak has the ability dissolve invisible net of racist social practices because it reveals the concrete and institutional manifestations of such practices to be transient, constructed, malleable.

Plague’s role in upending segregationist practices is evident in *Tracks* as well. At its outset, the novel valorizes the interethnic moment following the tuberculosis outbreak in which white and native communities in and around the reservation care for each other. When Nanapush first addresses his audience it is to relate how he and Fleur, barely recovered from the disease that claimed both of their families, nearly succumbed to a secondary “invisible sickness” because the boundary between the dead and the living has been breached. As he buried Fleur’s deceased family members, he had asked the spirits of the dead to continue on their journey to the West, but instead they followed him home. Soon he and Fleur are sickened again as the names of their deceased loved ones “[g]rew within us, swelled to the brink of our lips, forced our eyes open in the middle of the night. We were filled with the water of the drowned, cold and black, airless water that lapped against the seal of our tongues or leaked slowly from the corners of our eyes” (6). This infection by the dead past is broken, however, when a white priest shatters the spell of Nanapush and Fleur’s isolation. As Father Damien stumbles into their cabin, the two are “saved by one thought: a guest must eat.” His tongue oiled by a meager meal of tea and bread he assembles for their guest, Nanapush is soon “off and talking [in] both languages, streams that ran alongside each other” (7) as he tests the reservation’s newest ecclesiastical emissary. The visit

from Father Damien (who is himself revealed to be transgender in Erdrich's later novels) thus precipitates Nanapush and Fleur's return to the land of the living, banishing the sickness brought on by the dead. It also marks the beginning of a life-long and mutually supportive friendship between the priest and the survivors: Damien is instrumental in helping Nanapush and Fleur to manage their various disputes with the Indian Agent, and helps Nanapush to win election to the tribal council at the end of the novel. In *Tracks*, like "Fever," an epidemic leads to the softening of boundaries and the blending of that which is normally kept separate, facilitating communion between white and minority communities and highlighting their mutual dependence.

Yet in both texts what follows sickness is not health, but re-segregation and exploitation. In *Tracks*, the spring following the epidemic brings new growth and renewed hope—and also white surveyors, who carve up the reservation into parcels that will be deftly plucked from the tribe's grasp. The African American community in "Fever" similarly cannot profit, as a whole, by its more intimate relationship with the white community. Initially, the mayor's decision to suspend the colonial Code Noir enables many to enjoy new mobility and higher pay as draymen, nurses, and undertakers. Yet one of the story's many narrators, an unnamed older free black known only as Eye, notes that despite this seeming dissolution of racial demarcation amongst those who "frolic in the streets. Black and white. The ones who believe they are either or both or neither" (155) the conditions of many members of the African American community are unchanged, and at times worse, than they were before. For despite the new income earned by those lucky few, Eye notes that many "still abide in dark cellars, caves dug into the earth below poor men's houses. For we are poorer still....No wonder then that the celebration does not end as a blazing chill sweeps off the Delaware. Those who leap and roar round the bonfires...have no place else to go" (156). Despite the lifting of the color line and the infusion of white capital, many fail to partake in the modest benefits accorded to black elites like Allen. In both these

narratives, the retrenchment of inequality is filtered through a nuanced critique of the failure of community leaders to stem the crisis.

I submit that the pathological tropes in Native- and African American novels are therefore executing a complex and heretofore unacknowledged double critique of culture in the postnationalist period. In foregrounding pathological bodies that are inexplicably plagued by indeterminate or chronic ailments, these literary texts slyly suggest that material conditions and systemic inequalities continue to plague minority communities, and intimate that shifting identity from a racial register into a cultural one cannot cure the inequities that persist under neoliberal multiculturalism. Yet this criticism is directed inward as well, at prominent historical figures strongly associated with resistance, communal self-determination, and uplift. In highlighting the failed acts of healing of powerful visionaries like Fleur and Bishop Richard Allen, these texts also implicitly critique the nationalist paradigms of collectivity they represent as tethered restrictively to past cultural values and mythologies of origin(ality).⁷ By portraying the uncertain etiologies of infection alongside failed attempts to heal the minority community, these texts use tropes of disease and contingency to critique both neoliberal multiculturalism as well as the therapeutic solutions intended to address it.

The vein of sickly imagery uniting these disparate literary traditions represents something far more complex than a mere reflection of widespread frustrations with the new and deeply entrenched form of systemic racism that emerged from the confusion surrounding the turn to culture following the racial break. Far from an expression of relativism, pessimism, or a metaphorical remainder of past trauma, the diseased figures in the texts I will examine here

⁷ Fleur, for instance, resolves to fight the surveyors (and their Anishinaabe allies) the Pillager way, by using her personal powers to distract, intimidate, or eliminate those who get too close, and dismisses Nanapush's and Damien's attempts to write state, local, and federal officials to petition for communal self-determination. Allen is also depicted as in thrall to the "resplendent, shining vision" of freed slaves breaking their chains, parting the waters, and walking back across the Atlantic to repatriate Africa. There's an interesting parallel between these visions and the shimmering visual migraines that regularly blind his character in Wideman's later *The Cattle Killing*, a novel that augments and expands Allen's tale. These motifs of visionary blindness seem to undercut his attempts at uplift, literally blinding Allen to the concrete material conditions experience by the black community related by other characters like Eye.

suggest something more radical. For the suffering of the ailing protagonists in the texts is alloyed by the valuable insights, surprising alliances, and powerful new means of affiliation they discover in the throes of their illnesses. In valuing states of vulnerability, entanglement, and mutual dependency, the Native- and African American texts I consider implicitly elevate forms of agency and belonging that are profoundly interconnected and dynamic. By prizing connection and contingency over isolation and determinism, pathological tropes reveal the rhyme between commodified and nostalgic reproductions of minority identity, and counter both with depictions of individuals and communities that are interdependent and mutable. The pathological body is thus a rich and historically resonant trope that magnifies the contradictions inherent within both neoliberalism and the therapeutic cultural politics deployed to resist it. Such contingent positions embrace and channel paradox, contradiction, and conflict into a materially engaged politics that remobilizes and reenergizes African American or Native American communities previously stymied by the turn to culture as the nexus of affiliation that took place under neoliberalism and its abreaction, therapeutic cultural identity politics.

II. The Cultural Cure: Revanchism, Multiculturalism, and the Therapeutic Response

Many scholars who have labored to make sense of the contradictory outcome of Civil Rights reforms trace their decline to the formation of new, subtler systemic racism that barred the majority of Afro- and Native Americans from achieving full social parity. Sociologists and racial formation theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that the materially redistributive politics of the wave of minority officials voted into local, state, and national offices after 1968 and the myriad legislative victories won by Native American activists in the 1970s were transformed into acts of token minority inclusion that obscured the persistence of economic marginalization in black and Indian communities.

Omi and Winant track this phenomenon to the transformation of discourses of racial difference into cultural ones, what they refer to variously as multiculturalism, “the ethnicity paradigm,” or “cultural pluralism.” This school of thought proposes that, though the concrete and very real benefits that followed the elimination of *de jure* discrimination following the passage of the Civil Rights and Self-Determination Acts ought not to be gainsaid, it is important to recognize that these victories were only partial. According to Omi and Winant, a standard pattern emerged as the governing hegemony responded to the demands of various minority rights movements: gestural reforms were attained at tremendous cost to individual activists, but these did not significantly alter the underlying patterns of racial discrimination.⁸ *De facto* discrimination persisted even after the partial reforms enacted by the racial break, and multiculturalism was instrumental, not incidental, to its survival.

According to the narrative proffered by racial formation theory, a neoconservative white revanchism grew as confusion, discord, and exhaustion fractured the civil rights coalition. The piecemeal implementation of civil rights reforms created a rift between moderate integrationists and radical nationalists, one that widened as the latter came under attack from state agencies’ efforts to violently suppress nationalist movements. This two-pronged strategy to containing the racial justice movements was engineered by the coalition of white revanchist interests. This politically organized white resentment, born in the late 1960s, grew in sophistication as it developed through the 1970s and into the 1980s with the help of new conservative think tanks and lobbying groups.⁹ This neoconservative revanchism downplayed older tactics of overt

⁸ Omi and Winant 211. Speaking of the black Civil Rights Movement in particular, Omi and Winant submit that the policy, judicial, and representational reforms enacted were real and valuable, yet limited because they were “implemented unevenly through the state apparatus at all levels” (172). Though they are careful to note that this unevenness was “not enough to curtail the movement’s political effects” and that winning partial democratization was empowering, by and large the halfhearted and disjointed adoption of the movement agenda compromised many of its demands, which “subsequently rendered the movement less effectual in respect to the deeper conflicts that had shaped its original demands” (201-2).

⁹ Touting conservative traditional values as the antidote to the social turmoil of the 1960s, the Republican Party deployed the infamous ‘Southern Strategy’ to break the Democratic Party’s grip on the South by organizing white middle-class suburban voters around the defense of *de facto* segregation. Four major think tanks and lobbying firms were founded in the 1970s:

bigotry and violence and erected more subtle structural barriers to ethnic social parity instead. These included (but were by no means limited to) the defunding of federal anti-poverty initiatives, white flight to the suburbs, anti-tax referendums, red-lining, credit rationing, voter I.D. laws, and mass incarceration.¹⁰ These institutionalized obstacles to full social, economic, and political inclusion for minorities were also exacerbated by a full scale attack on the policies implemented by civil rights reforms, an assault cloaked in the very same rhetoric of equality and justice that liberal racial reformists had used. Masterfully, these revanchist attacks “rearticulated civil rights doctrines of equality and community control,” to argue that mainstream white Americans constituted an ethnic group whose inalienable rights were also endangered. Namely, these revolved around “the freedom to choose,” a move which was, in reality, the freedom to support discriminatory practices that re-segregated communities, schools, and workplaces (Omi and Winant 193).

Neoconservative revanchists willfully conflated the suppression of overt bigotry with the absence of all barriers to social parity, recast the quest of Civil Rights as complete, and misrepresented any further redistribution of resources as a zero-sum game taking capital from whites and giving it to people of color. In reality, discourses of cultural affiliation and identity were employed to obfuscate the campaign of economic and political suppression carried out by white revanchist interests, and multiculturalism became the ideological smoke screen deployed by neoconservative revanchists. Racial formation theorists maintain that a radically race-

The Heritage Foundation (1973), The Koch/Cato Institute (1974), The Conservative Caucus (1974), and the National Conservative Political Action Committee (1975).

¹⁰ Johnson’s Economic Opportunity Programs began to be scaled back by his Republican successor, Nixon, just six years after they were enacted in 1971. The racial re-segregation of metropolitan areas, abetted by the new national highway system and the race rebellions of the late 1960s, fueled the departure of upper and middle class whites from inner cities. Proposition 13 passed into law in 1978 in California, sparking a wave of anti-tax referendums that kept the growth of property taxes on homes below what their actual appreciation was, and disallowed the redistribution of property tax revenues among neighboring municipalities. Redlining is the direct or indirect denial of financial or planning services to someone based on their location, and racial steering is the practice of showing prospective buyers homes in particular neighborhoods on the basis of their race. South Carolina has had a voter I.D. provision since the 1950s, but Hawaii, Texas, Florida and Alaska all enacted voter I.D. laws by 1980. The mass incarceration crisis began with the Sentencing Reform Act passed by President Reagan’s administration in 1984.

conscious pragmatism is needed to combat “the deepening crisis of race and racism” such multicultural critical paradigms have engineered (Omi and Winant 1). To achieve it, liberal scholars and activists need to take back “the emancipatory politics of identity” from neoconservatives and foreground the social and institutional construction of racial inequalities in order to dismantle them once and for all (Omi and Winant 15), which will eventually remobilize the masses to take political action.

Scholars representing the Cultural Studies school of thought contend, however, that culture can prove an invaluable site of political resistance and organizing, and caution that attributing emancipatory power to any identity—cultural, political, or otherwise—with the power to determine a group’s social fate is specious. Rather, these theorists maintain that the way in which identity and difference are used to form alliances must be carefully scrutinized. Cultural Studies emerged in the 1950s in the United Kingdom to argue that culture was not solely a reflection of economic conditions, because it is a space in which individuals can either replicate *or* adapt and modify received cultural narratives. On this view, cultural production proves to be an important site for political and social struggle. In the 1970s Cultural Studies expanded this sense of the political dimension of culture to encompass issues of race and gender identity, and argued that culture was more than a marker of ethnic or sexual difference but also a space where forms of subordination that create gender and racial inequities could be called into question. This analysis into how difference was constituted between social groups soon led to analysis of how it was formed within those groups as well. In the 1980s Stuart Hall, Lawrence Grossberg, and Chantal Mouffe drew upon the theory of articulation developed by Antonio Gramsci to explain the contingency and complexity of affiliation by unpacking the multiplicity of positions, experiences, and interests comprising each individual subject. On their argument, contingent forms of identification are therefore critical to avoiding deterministic binaries that drastically inflate the role of either culture or the political economy in structuring social life.

Stuart Hall, in particular, incisively argued that this emphasis on the contingency and interrelatedness of all identities precipitated the shift to a “new cultural politics” in the 1980s.¹¹ He argued that this new politics signaled the end of critical innocence because it required the abandonment of the sense of group identity as inborn and homogenous that characterized its predecessor. This repudiation was urgently needed because although this strategic essentialism had played a valuable role in uniting minority communities to contest the racist denigration of their cultural beliefs and practices, the same techniques had since been appropriated by white revanchist interests. The result was a novel “cultural racism” that was comprised of “a culturally constructed sense of Englishness and a particularly closed, exclusive and regressive form of English national identity...[that served] as a means of disavowing the realities of racism and repression” (447). The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies was also instrumental in linking this multicultural racism to new developments in the culture industry. Hall explained how the revanchist refusal to recognize the effects of systemic racism was abetted by rapid accelerations in communication and entertainment technologies. On this argument, the culture industry met demands for real equality and economic and political parity with the commodified spectacle of diversity and incorporation in mass media and television.¹² The realm of popular culture became an especially fraught one for minorities, a commercial space in which identitarian differences could be reproduced and commodified *or* one where these reductive stereotypes could be parodied, re-appropriated, and subverted.

The quest to embrace Hall’s new cultural politics and displace the commodity aesthetics that fuels multicultural racism has only deepened the sense of crisis amongst postnationalist intellectuals, however. While scholars like Katherine Shanley (Assiniboine), Hazel Carby, Jack

¹¹ See Stuart Hall’s “New Ethnicities”, particularly 446-8, for more.

¹² Journalist Christopher Daly gives a good account of the various mergers and acquisitions that led to the growth of global media corporations and the shift towards profitability and shareholder appeasement that began in 1985, when Capital Cities Corporation bought ABC, General Electric bought NBC, and Rupert Murdoch merged Fox Film Corp and several independent stations to create the Fox News Network in *Covering America*.

Forbes (Renape/Lenape), Chantal Mouffe, and Kobena Mercer demonstrated that a constructivist sense of contingency did have a vital role to play in resisting appropriation and opening cultural production to the “play of power”¹³—others scrambled the Cultural Studies formula. Rather than subverting reductive stereotypes with an emphasis on the interdependent relationship between the mainstream and the marginal, several postnationalist scholars instead strove to codify a sense of ethnic belonging that couldn’t be commodified. For instance, in the texts that served as the foundation for Native American literary studies in the 1980s, authors Simon Ortiz (Acoma) and Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna/Sioux) argued that “the creative ability of Indian people to gather in many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make these forms meaningful in their own terms” is “the truest and most authentic sense” of what it means to be Native American.¹⁴ Their contemporaries in African American Studies, vernacular critics Houston Baker Jr. and Henry Louis Gates Jr., laid claim to a similar authenticity for black vernacular expression, citing it as a formal strategy, a repetition of “complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black” but “with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use.”¹⁵ These strategies for deriving an authentic form of minority aesthetics from a varied cultural history allows these intellectuals to adopt a nominally contingent and non-biological basis for ethnic identification and solidarity. This was paramount for these

¹³ Hall “What is this ‘black’” 472-75. Shanley’s “Thoughts on Indian Feminism” (1984) demonstrates this more measured approach to forms of belonging. For Carby’s call to contingency, see her 1989 article “The Canon: Civil War and Reconstruction.” Cf. with Chantal Mouffe’s thoughts on how to shift the “pole of identification” in a more pluralistic and radically democratic way, see her “The Civics Lesson.” Cf. also Kobena Mercer’s and Isaac Julien’s “De Margin and De Centre” from 1988.

¹⁴ Ortiz, “Toward a national Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism,” p 8. Similarly, two years later in *The Sacred Hoop*, which was the first sustained work of Native American literary criticism written by an indigenous scholar, Paula Gunn Allen maintained that American Indian literature “forms a field, or, we might say, a hoop dance, and as such is a dynamic, vital whole whose different expressions refer to a tradition that is unified and coherent in its own terms. It is a literary tradition that is breathtaking in its aesthetic realization and fundamental to coherent understanding of non-Indian varieties of American literature” (4). For Allen, the ability of mixedblood poets to create unity out of fragmentary and disparate cultural experiences stem from in the oral tradition, which is “based on the mystical understanding of unity that is not as material as it is psychic” and which generates “the peculiar unitariness of consciousness, despite surface contradictions, that marks American Indian poetry” (175).

¹⁵ Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p xix. Later New Black Aesthetic scholars Gregory Tate and Trey Ellis would make a similar move in averring that their positions as “cultural mulattos” were precisely what allowed them to unlock more authentic forms of African American expression (235).

early postnationalist intellectuals because essentialism had stymied prior nationalist movements, depriving them of interethnic support, resources, and collaboration, just as a well-laid fire can be starved by lack of oxygen.

However, this emphasis on authenticity did not meaningfully challenge the essentialist sense of cultural identity developed within nationalists movements, and ultimately reinforced it. This was because instead of confronting cultural reification with the assertion of culture as a continually unfolding process, these postnationalist ethnic studies scholars posited that contingency has always been an inherent part of minority cultural practices. The thing that marks Afro- or Native American uniqueness is something that was always already there, a distinctive style that can neither be fabricated nor sold. Yet an inherited sense of style—even a style predicated on the intertextual indeterminacy of signifyin(g)—is still an essentialist construct if it is passed down unchanged through time within a certain group. Instead of using cultural change to signal the arbitrariness of the boundaries drawn between ethnic groups and the intimate connection between cultural production and the political economy, these early postnationalist scholars invalidated Hall's careful contingencies. In other words, they took this sense of culture as an unfolding landscape everyone farmed and recast it as a private garden only a few could access. Though the laudable intent of this pioneering scholarship from the 1980s was to raise the profile of Ethnic Studies and diversify the curriculum, the result was cutting-edge equivocation. Predicated upon a sense of innate difference and separate, insular group identities, these postnationalist equivocations reinforced and disguised scientific racism with a toxic combination of cultural essentialism and determinism—the same cultural identity politics that had hampered nationalist movements and bolstered their neoconservative antagonists in the 1970s.¹⁶

¹⁶ Cf. with Michael Douglass's account of how the politics of recognition and cultural identity came to be shared by those on both the left and right in his *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (2009): esp. p314-323.

The critics who counter and qualify these postnationalist accounts of authenticity are deeply skeptical of the turn towards culture as a means of securing minority solidarity.¹⁷ The chief fault these critiques seek to address within postnationalist accounts is how the attempt to attribute an inimitable style to minority culture obscured ongoing changes within the political economy. In her insightful study of postmodernism within black urban literature, critic Madhu Dubey argues that the crisis in cultural representation wrought by multicultural commodification is deeply entangled with the crisis in political representation that also stymied minority communities from the 1980s onwards. As the popular culture industry was changing patterns in cultural consumption and transforming how minority communities saw themselves and were seen by others, their ability to band together and continue the campaign for social justice was challenged from beneath by worsening economic conditions. Thus minority communities faced the quadruple threat as the 1980s dawned, as a formidable compendium of high inflation and unemployment, massive budget cuts to federal aid programs, and the beginnings of the mass incarceration epidemic congealed. African- and American Indian communities, which are statistically the poorest in the United States, were especially hard hit by these changes.¹⁸ “Yet, or more precisely *because* of this” these communities found themselves to be “fetishized as the guarantors of everything that is felt to be at risk in the postmodern era—bodily presence, palpable reality, political intentionality” (Dubey 8). This recoding of straitened conditions as authenticity, as an enhanced physical and material presence, generates an ambivalent sense of the corporeal within postnationalist fiction. Tropes of corporeal ambivalence and pathology are

¹⁷ This body of intellectual work traces its lineage back to Nathan Huggin’s renunciation of the salvific version of cultural expression extolled during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1970s and the sociological expansion of that argument in the 1980s to include work by Stephen Steinberg and ethnic studies scholars like William Boelhower and Werner Sollors. The line of critique that grew from this mixed scholarly heritage exploded in the 1990s with the work of political scientists like Wendy Brown and Adolph Reed, New Americanists like Walter Michaels and Ross Posnock, and ethnic American literary critics like Kenneth Warren and Gene Jarrett, Arnold Krupat, Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), Louis Owens (Cherokee/Choctaw), and Robert Dale Parker.

¹⁸ According to data from the Pew Research Center, which in 2012 reported that African Americans, followed by Native Americans, were two groups who experienced the highest rates of poverty at 28% and 26% of their total populations. Hispanic Americans came in a close third at 25%, however. “One-in-four Native Americans and Alaska Natives are living in Poverty” (2014).

therefore paramount for understanding the nexus of the seismic political, economic, and cultural shifts taking place in the postnationalist period.

III. Cultural Identity Politics: Class, Nostalgia, and Neoliberalism

Other prominent African American scholars who look askance at cultural identity politics focus even more explicitly on the role elite critics play as they navigate the representational crises of the postnationalist period. Kenneth Warren and political scientist Adolph Reed, in particular, argue that cultural essentialism was a novel tactic whereby the new class of black intellectuals could warrant their status as public spokespersons for the black community they were politically and economically diverging from.¹⁹ This phenomenon was by no means limited to black Americans either. Sociologists like Sam Cook and Joseph Jorgensen have demonstrated that in Indian Country the uneven implementation of self-determination policies deregulated and decentralized the mechanisms of funding. This meant that oversight waned and power accrued in the Area Offices run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, where white regional directors steered the shrinking stream of federal dollars towards individual leaders and factions who upheld the status quo, who in turn promoted their supporters into positions of power and held onto it for as long as they could.²⁰ If Self-Determination had swelled the ranks of the middle class on reservations by creating more government jobs, those positions grew increasingly perilous and tied to partisanism

¹⁹ Cf. Hortense Spillers 1994 essay, "*The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-Date*," esp. p 429-35, for her excellent characterization of the maelstrom of social and economic forces encouraging the upper class intellectual towards greater feats of mobility while quelling self-reflection in the postnationalist era.

²⁰ For a more extensive analysis of growth of power at the level of the Area offices from the Economic Opportunity initiatives of the 60s through the early years of self-determination, see Duane Champagne. For nearly two decades, many Indian nations found themselves forced with a tough choice: to either rely on the professionally-trained personnel located in the Area Offices to administer social programs or to attract and train administrative workforces of their own despite uncertain funding streams. As Champagne has thoroughly researched, the concentration of power in the regional Area offices was due to their lack of accountability to either the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs or the tribes themselves. One notable example of widening income inequality between minority leaders and their constituents was Navajo tribal chairman Peter MacDonald Sr., who was indicted on corruption charges in 1989 after serving almost two decades in office, where he abused his power to spend lavishly on clothing and cars, routinely engineer sweetheart real estate deals for friends, and regularly charter private jets to football games in Florida and events in Washington, D.C.

as the 1980s progressed. This made the transmission of institutional knowledge and expertise very difficult in Native American communities, and the combination of intratribal conflict with the revanchist assault from without generated what sociologist Laura Evans terms “soft disempowerment.”²¹ That is, tribal governments were often so exhausted by responding to the multiple stages, temporalities, and degrees of conflict that they were too fatigued to navigate the complex intergovernmental dance of federalism. The growing class divisions between elected officials and their constituencies in the postnationalist period, coupled with myriad social crises, put enormous pressure on minority leaders, who served their communities with mixed success.

Scholars of cultural identity politics are most insightful when they link growing class division to a peculiar cultural dominant in minority fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, that of historicism. Not to be confused with historicity (or contextual and diachronic analysis), historicism is the stylized or simulacral use of the past that has arisen in tandem with the expansion and acceleration of the culture industry. According to political theorists like Wendy Brown and literary critics like Robert Warrior, Arnold Krupat, and Erica Edwards, the exacerbation of racial inequality in the postnationalist period has been obscured by the articulation of racial injury and racial identification *as* injury. Historicism does this by locating both present-day racial woes and their solutions within idealizations of past experiences. It is twofold, in that it reduces present inequality down to emanations from past injustices while it simultaneously glorifies past communal values and practices as holistic, specially targeted therapies born out of the survival of that same trauma.²² Minority identity is construed as deeply embedded in past conditions, which in turn are used to generate political solidarity in the

²¹ In *Power from Powerlessness*, Laura Evans finds that “When tribal governments were spent, they were oftentimes incoherent. Such soft, indirect disempowerment often goes undetected...it’s easy to mislabel exhaustion as failed leadership” (166).

²² For examples of this historicism at work in Afro- and Native American criticism, see Toni Morrison’s 1981 essay “City Limits, Village Values” and Taiaiake Alfred’s (Mohawk) *Peace, Power, Righteousness* (1999).

present.²³ As Warren powerfully suggests, this reductive and reified sense of trauma is paired with an equally reductive sense of tradition, giving rise to an identity politics that figures cultural norms from the past as immutable and which endows these cultural forms with the power to heal present social ills. If historical cultural beliefs, values, and practices are reduced to essentialist shells when they are used to forge solidarity in the face of ongoing systemic racism, then what can combat the new multicultural racism? Many prominent scholars, like Warren, Omi and Winant, Walter Michaels, and Jodi Melamed call for a renewed direct action politics to achieve an anti-racist politics of redistribution. Yet even as new cross-state citizen-driven activist movements like Black Lives Matter, NoDAPL, and Sanctuary Cities are gaining momentum from the aftershocks of the 2016 election, they are countered at every turn by the considerable might of federal and state agencies controlled by neoconservative interests. Timely as these critiques are, they have illuminated the critical impasse facing scholars in Cultural and Ethnic studies today, but as of yet can pose not solution. They have plumbed the depths only to discover a false floor—that what was thought to be lakebed is merely the beginning of a semisolid and shifting layer of silt and muck—debris from over half a century of interdisciplinary debates and feuds forming an opacity that requires new techniques to pierce.

One explanation for the difficulty of untangling an effective politics from cultural politics comes from economic and political theorists like Wendy Brown, Lisa Duggan, Amartya Sen, and Jodi Dean. This cohort has focused especially on how the neoconservative misappropriation of the rhetoric of civil rights discourses has slowly undermined democratic institutions in the postnationalist period. Sen posits that this rhetorical contradiction is made possible by the broad and imprecise way its users employ the concept of freedom, and specifically in the way they emphasize negative freedom (freedom from certain constraints) and elide any consideration of

²³ Warren *So Black and Blue*, p 103. Also see Erica Edwards, “Black President Hokum,” p 56. Cf. with Wendy Brown’s *States of Injury*, where she argues that the reorganization of group identity around past injustices generates a “plastic cage” that reproduces and ontologizes identity as injury (27-9).

the conditions necessary to secure positive freedom (the ability or capacity to pursue full self-actualization). Brown argues that the widespread misappropriation of democratic discourse is what allowed neoliberalism to leap from economic ideology into a governing, normative order. This took place beginning in the 1980s, when the neoconservative coalition aimed at lowering taxes and limiting government domestic spending and business regulation joined forces with neoliberal economists to begin extending economic reasoning and rationality to all ways of life.²⁴ Both Brown and William Connolly agree that neoconservative and neoliberal interests share in the idealization of the past and future in order to allay present fears of the growing fragility of markets, nations, and ecosystems. Each normative order combats these misgivings with faith in a divine, self-regulating force from without that always has, and always will, steer the social in the proper direction. The democratic ideals of popular self-rule and the common pursuit of the public good, which check neoliberal attempts to transform the subject into an engine of self-investment, are now being eroded. This shift from shared responsibility, rights, and interests to competition and individualization everywhere exacerbates income inequality (for in poor minority communities there are few resources left to care for developing or overworked human capital (i.e. children, the elderly, and the disabled)), prompts more rapid production and consumption of commodity goods, and dissolves all non-commercialized forms of solidarity. Negative freedoms may increase under neoliberalism, but positive freedoms have dwindled severely. These straitened conditions can either lead to increased racial resentment and scapegoating or revolutionary social engagement and change, according to Connolly. The key to developing the

²⁴ Brown, following Francis Fukuyama, dates this ascendancy to 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall and the lack of a viable antagonist for democracy to define itself against, but there were many more domestic events that occurred earlier in the 1980s that pushed neoliberalism to the fore. The early 1980s saw the rapid development of “the market as a site of veridiction” where neoliberal tenets were circulated to warrant certain government acts through several interlinked phenomena (*Undoing* 67). These include, but are not limited to, the financial deregulation that prompted the Savings and Loan crisis, which generated huge debts and slowed economic growth (cost to taxpayers was estimated at \$125 billion dollars in 1995, by the crisis’ end). Instead of looking to policies of financial deregulation, however, this slowdown was falsely linked to federal entitlement spending. The blame for the 1980s downturn fell on the members of the poor rural and urban “underclass,” a discourse which was itself so easily proliferated because of the profit-motivated turn in national media reporting towards “infotainment” in the mid-1980s—which then prompted further divestment from social programs. So the vicious cycle began.

latter is increased role experimentation, which mediates between identities and institutions and “can disrupt and redirect the flow of authority, habit, regularity, and projection” and encourage others to reconsider their identity performances as well (*Fragility* 183). In this light, neoliberal governance can spur either re-segregation and balkanization or disruptive and indeterminate new forms of belonging and affiliation.

IV. Contingency and Pluralism

To parse this rich vein of pathological imagery in postnationalist novels, my project will examine them alongside scholars who are studying dynamic, networked, and contingent forms of belonging in sociology, cultural studies, and political theory. Scholars like Bruno Latour, Chantal Mouffe, Lauren Berlant, and William Connolly have been invaluable in challenging the relativist treatment of ethno-racial difference that characterizes multicultural politics and replacing it with what many of them refer to as “agonistic pluralism.” This processural and relationally-focused approach differs from older, racially naïve uses of the term that were themselves split between assimilationist (melting pot) and integrationist (symphonic) figurations and arguments. Instead, agonistic pluralism is a concept that stems from Alain Locke’s modifications of Horace Kallen’s symphonic concept—specifically Locke’s thesis on cultural convertability or mutual transformation, wherein he argued that cultures were modified by their interactions with other cultures. In this vein, agonistic pluralist theorists argue that conflict and incommensurate differences are inherent within the political—the key is not to view all differences as created equal, but rather to attend to the ways in which identities are formed and to assess if they are deployed to either challenge or sustain the status quo. Rather than reckoning all cultural identities as separate, non-conflictual, and equal to one another, agonistic pluralism views the debate, opposition, and contradiction that takes place between different subject positions as potentially

generative and helpful. Mouffe's explanation of this pluralist approach dovetails with my own emphasis on the pathology within identity politics, stating that it

should not be conceived as on existing between two principles entirely external to each other and establishing between themselves a simple relation of negotiation [but] envisaged instead as creating a relation not of *negotiation* but of *contamination*, in the sense that once the articulation of the two principles has been effectuated—even in a precarious way—each of them changes the identity of the other. (10)

These agonistic theorists are useful because they demonstrate how the paradox of our postnationalist, neoliberal moment can lead not deeper into despair or discourses of crisis (political, referential, or otherwise) but rather into an appreciation of the fact that the causal disjunction of system and environment, discourse and its object, language and its referent, should be viewed not as a foreclosure of the possibility of informed political practice and social theory, but rather as an opening and an invitation to a philosophical and political pluralism.

The first two chapters of the dissertation will consider the pluralist uses of pathology to craft alternative forms of collectivity in spite of neoliberal crises in African American fiction, and the third and fourth chapters will consider how this dynamic unfolded along similar, but not identical, lines in Native American fiction. In my first chapter, “‘The slack string is just a slack string’: Neoformalist Networks and Thick Subjectivity,” I read Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) as offering a wry alternative to literary and cultural critics who fixate on depictions of the minority community as trapped in perpetual crisis. Where contemporary works of African American fiction meliorate anxieties about the commodification and consumption of black culture by turning to nostalgic depictions of isolated communities as exemplars of health and wholeness, Beatty takes a different tack. Rather than depicting postnationalism as a “feel good moment” of cultural exchange and self-invention, Beatty juxtaposes cultural improvisation with depictions of infected and abject embodiment to present readers with a protagonist who *feels bad*. This ambivalent figure—who is simultaneously agent and object—anticipates Bruno

Latour's vision of the social as a network woven of both energizing and objectifying bonds.

Beatty's intrepid novel crafts a thick subjectivity to complement this thickened sociality, using it to theorize a form of community that resists both commodification and historicism. Intriguingly, *Shuffle* bases this alternative politics, not in the past, but in a zone of radical contingency and suspension that refuses to indulge in the fantasy of a brighter, rosier tomorrow. The result is a community unafraid to risk everything to strike a decisive blow against systemic racism.

In my second chapter, "Timeless Bodies of Pluralism", reverses this trajectory by commencing with a suspenseful moment of crisis in the present before moving to connect it to dire decisions made during the Reconstruction Era. I analyze how the protagonists of Colson Whitehead's novels *John Henry Days* (2001) and *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) notably progress from a lazy, disengaged multiculturalism to a more active pluralism as disease prompts them to delve back into the historical record, and abandon nostalgic and essentialist constructions of the African American community along the way. In these texts, the characters' sense of history accompanies an understanding of identity as relationally formed. Here communities engage in intense internal and external debates as they balance the need for affiliation and coherence with more pragmatic questions pertaining to changing needs, resource redistribution, and risk. In this way Whitehead's novels expand upon critic Lauren Berlant's insights on the tension between the affective constructs that weld communities together and the material needs that tear them apart. By shifting the readers' attention to the constitutive instability at the center of these constructs—as well as the mercurial nature of economic and sociocultural forces that inform them—Whitehead powerfully suggests that struggle is an ineradicable part of politics.

After a brief inter-chapter that helps to clarify and expand upon the similarities, but most importantly the differences, between Native American and African American Studies, the dissertation's third chapter, "The Cosmic Web, Contingency, and Postindian Survivance" will consider two American Indian novels where sickness likewise symbolizes the impact of political

and cultural marginalization and misrepresentation on tribal identities in the postnationalist period. Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991) and Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1996) are similar to Beatty's novel in that they too locate political alternatives to multiculturalism in precarious situations that risk the entire community's health and wellbeing. Unlike Beatty's text, however, in these novels the ability to heal the Native American community wounded by neoliberal multiculturalism is not sacrificed in order to unite it. Alexie's and Vizenor's novels instead locate healing in a redistribution of power and respect for difference, in a manner that resonates strongly with theorist William Connolly's revision of political theories of pluralism. Figured as spread amongst a complex web of interdependent agents, this disseminated responsibility allows the community to resist both cultural commodification from without as well as political misrepresentation within—a pose Vizenor terms “survivance.” I argue that his novel, in particular, forms a pointed critique of the uneven implementation of the Indian Self-Determination Act in the 1970s and 80s and the deleterious effects it had on tribal governments. Countering political and cultural misrepresentation with contingent figurations of tribal identity, Vizenor's vision of communality weds political opposition to the cultivation of diversity and care for life.

In my fourth chapter “‘Were you cured?': Latency, Nationalism, and Sovereignty,” I examine Louise Erdrich's *Four Souls* (2004) and *A Plague of Doves* (2008), which both consider how a horrific string of events in the Allotment era reverberates for generations among Native and settler communities in rural North Dakota. Like the novels analyzed in the second chapter, *Souls* and *Doves* track the evolution of racial injustice and prejudice over the course of the long twentieth century and links its difficult prognosis to chronic illnesses like latent tuberculosis, diabetes, and cancer. At the center of Erdrich's *Doves* are three women from three separate generations whose failed and ambivalent acts of healing prompt them to reexamine the roots of the tragedy that has haunted their town. Through their investigations, the women repudiate

historicism, univocality, and transcendence in favor of the uncertain and unending task of culling of knowledge from chaos. This, in turn, is productive of a thicker, entangled community whose doom is both foretold and resisted by the doctor-turned-historian whose words conclude the novel. I ground this meditation on precarious communality in Connolly's latest theorization of pluralist engagement and experimentation to argue that Erdrich has crafted a sense of identity that is both agile enough to resist the commodifying and particularizing forces of neoliberalism and powerful enough to sustain a more agonistic, open, and ethical sense of being in the world. Emphasizing the long and slow path from disenfranchisement to a fuller expression of tribal sovereignty, Erdrich inveighs decisively against the reinvention of literary nationalism to instead argue that the soft disempowerment of neoliberalism is better countered by an ethos of dynamic relationality.

In conclusion I will briefly analyze how Blake Hausman's debut novel *Riding the Trail of Tears* and Colson Whitehead's genre-bending *Zone One* (2011) both use tropes of ailing (and undead) embodiment to understand the end of two very different periods of post-apocalyptic Reconstruction. In so doing, they turn to dystopic future worlds as a means of liberating the past from culturally deterministic identity politics, eschewing both nostalgic historicism and optimistic futurity to ground their protagonists in the messy political struggles of the present moment. Yet while Whitehead's protagonist continues to be haunted—or rather, dusted—with the detritus of neoliberal identity politics until he disappears, Hausman's text suggests that greater visibility and exposure may help to enact the very pluralist relationality his peer posits as impossible.

The rich figurations of pathology running through this archive of texts metaphorically reflects and undermines the essentialist logic contained within the cultural turn that has dominated, and enervated, minority rights discourses of the last half-century. Constantly in flux, the pathological body negotiates between external agents and internal defense mechanisms, long

latency periods and sudden metastases, blurring the line between sickness and health, the individual and the community, victim and vector. These pathological tropes dismantle unhealthy ways of conceptualizing community and point to more adaptive forms of belonging that are better able to navigate a shifting network of social, economic, and political forces.

CHAPTER ONE

“THE SLACK STRING IS JUST A SLACK STRING”: NEOFORMALIST NETWORKS IN *THE WHITE BOY SHUFFLE*

For all its wicked satire and kaleidoscopic cultural improvisation, Paul Beatty's meditation on the political uses of cultural production in his debut novel *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) doesn't appear to go anywhere. This is because Beatty's narrative ends precisely where it began: portraying the novel's *poète maudit* Gunnar Kaufman as he reluctantly takes on the task of mobilizing the black community, encouraging them to embrace revolutionary suicide in lieu of continuing the losing battle against institutionalized racism in the United States at the close of the twentieth century. In depicting Gunnar's success as a politician and poet as predicated on the immanent demise of both the public intellectual as well as his constituency, Beatty's text does more than denounce the political uses of poesis, or the aestheticization of politics. Significantly, it refuses to resolve these contradictions—to decide if cultural production proceeds from or precedes political action—focusing instead on forms of collective belonging that embrace such antitheses rather than foreclose them. The critical contribution of *The White Boy Shuffle* therefore lies not in revealing cultural production to be contingent upon political exigency, or the reverse, as much as it does in recognizing the value of contingency itself. What Beatty's novel evinces, beginning as it does *in media res* and refusing conclusion, is not equivocation, but rather a meditation on being, quite literally, in the middle of things.

In so doing, *Shuffle* highlights the similarity between the impasses afflicting both postmodern literary theory and contemporary literary criticism. Just as postmodern literary theorists seek to surpass Frederic Jameson's observations on the growing isomorphism of cultural

production and political economies of commodified exchange, so too do Americanist literary critics desire to move beyond cataloging the sins of a multiculturalism that finds political apotheosis in the mere recognition of cultural differences. If this appropriation of aesthetic production by political ideologies—or cultural politics²⁵—has long been portrayed as *the* crisis of both postmodern and ethnic American literature, literary critical and theoretical discourses agree that there is nothing more to be gained by pointing this out. Yet both scholarly discourses seem unable to move beyond doing so, and fail to escape the orbit of crisis criticism. Kenneth Warren argues that critics merely revalue the effects of postmodern crises instead of remediating their causes, and he concludes his recent study *What Was African American Literature?* with the terse warning that “symptoms are rarely cures” (148). Ironically, what Warren and other scholars have not accounted for is the usage of the pathological metaphor in several late-twentieth and early twenty-first century Afro- and Native-American novels as a means to challenge cultural politics. Put more simply, novelists like Louise Erdrich, Danzy Senna, Michael Thomas, Colson Whitehead, and Sherman Alexie have counterpoised the “feel good moment” of cultural politics, not with a resurgence of cultural nationalism or other identitarian devices, but rather with texts that *feel bad*: foregrounding the inscrutable physical ailments plaguing the black subject despite the ebullient rhetoric of postracial millenarianism and multiculturalism.²⁶

²⁵ More than two decades have lapsed, for instance, since Cornel West famously declared the advent of the “new cultural politics of difference” to officiate over the retirement of essentialist accounts of the black subject and the end of divisive identity politics (93). Subsequent Ethnic and Cultural Studies works have tempered this declaration, ceding the point that the cultural production of identity can offer a more constructionist fulcrum for social activism and communal belonging, yet—following Stuart Hall’s rejoinder to West—cautioning that a postmodern cultural politics must espouse a “different logic of difference” lest it reproduce the very essentialist forms of decontextualized, naturalized, and reified identity that it was meant to depose (108). In theory, cultural politics avoids this by reorganizing identity around a more malleable discourse of ethno-cultural beliefs and practices, rather than the racial rhetoric of blood and heritability. Critical accounts by Walter Benn Michaels, Adolph Reed, and Kenneth Warren suggest, however, that in practice culture has emerged as formally equivalent to and even interchangeable with the racial categories it was meant to replace. We have “moved without moving”: merely substituting cultural essentialism for biological essentialism as the basis for communal identity and political representation (Warren, *So Black* 99).

²⁶ For more on the “feel good moment” of cultural politics and the New Black Aesthetic in particular, see Warren’s *What Was*, p 120-27.

The abject and ill ethnic body emerges in *Shuffle* and these other contemporary works of ethnic American literature, I argue, to highlight the contradictions subtending cultural politics. Consider, for example, Gunnar's first encounter with racial essentialism or "traditional black experience" (46) shortly after his family moves from idyllic Santa Monica to Hillside in West Los Angeles. When the multicultural aegis of the white police officers welcoming the family to the neighborhood lapses into racial profiling, Gunnar's naïve attempt at "an out-of-body experience" (47) results in a nothing more than a lingering bout of flatulence. Gunnar thus odiferously finds that he is "tethered—grounded to reality" (47) and to his body—as inexorably as a balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. Only one of several moments demonstrating the recurrence of the thingly body beyond volitional control, scenes like the above do more than imply that our faith in cultural politics as the cure-all for racism has been misplaced. Rather, the text's ironic emphasis on embodiment within the postracial moment of multiculturalism illuminates the double move by which cultural politics forswear yet reify the corporeal as a site of meaning, exchange, and production.

This corporeal ambivalence attending the minority body is at the center of one of the most ambiguous issues in postmodern cultural studies: that is, the precise nature of the relation between politico-economic and cultural change. Literary critic Madhu Dubey trenchantly links such paradoxical embodiment to the animating contradiction of postmodern multiculturalism; namely, that its stated goal (the cultural inclusion of minorities) is effaced by its actual effects (the continuing exclusion of minorities from economic and political parity). Cultural value and political power are thus inversely related, so that "aesthetic appreciation comes to compensate for and thereby mystify the realities of material suffering" (9). Specifically, corporeal ambivalence arises when the concrete structural effects of economic deprivation are recast as desirable, amplified forms of physicality, forms that are then deemed ontologically inherent to ethnic minorities. This transmutation of disenfranchising socioeconomic conditions into positive

cultural identities participates in what Dubey terms the “romance of the residual” (8): a critical paradigm that locates resistance to institutionalized inequality in the simple reversal and revaluation of the effects of social marginalization. That is, the romance of the residual inverts existing hegemonic binaries, and elevates the formerly subordinate term as a locus for collective solidarity and resistance—instead of addressing the historical context and construction of the binary relationship itself. Political agency is thus derived through proximity to the marginal, the abject, and the negative, and recourse to shared past experiences of enslavement and segregation is seen to generate communal strength and solidarity in work of prominent black cultural studies critics like Sharon Holland, Paul Gilroy, and Kathryn Bond-Stockton.

This romance would seem to obtain in *Shuffle*’s case as well. It is a text, after all, that fondly satirizes the ‘lighter’ vagaries of ghetto culture—like inept police profiling and the homoerotic homophobia of gang culture—equally alongside weightier subjects like homicide, rape, self-mutilation, and the promise of revolutionary mass suicide. Upon further examination, however, what appears to be merely another iteration of this romance in *Shuffle* is in effect a critique of it. Consider the graphic account of Gunnar’s sexual molestation by two Hillside girls, Betty and Veronica, for instance. This scene is characterized by a marked contrast between the vulgar and aggressive language depicting the painful and nonconsensual nature of the encounter and the paradoxically golden afterglow that follows it. The two girls catch Gunnar unawares in his building’s laundry room, and after he is efficiently disrobed and “shackled into submission” (82) with his undergarments Betty and Veronica duel with him and with each other over his body. As they grapple Betty and Veronica sing gospel-inspired double entendres, plucking Gunnar’s flaccid member “like a bass string” (82) to accompany them while they excruciatingly squeeze his genitals and force his face and hands onto their bodies. Betty commands Gunnar to sing and “[g]ive your frigid spirit wings” (83), and once freed he walks home to pen his first poem, singing the entire way and befriending a local gang leader in passing. The attack is thus portrayed

as a net positive in that it appears to ameliorate the “[c]orporeally mute” (52) awkwardness Gunnar first felt upon his arrival in the neighborhood, liberating his expressive powers and expediting his acceptance into the Hillside community. Though this scene might read like the recoding of the straitened conditions visited upon urban minority populations as metaphysically uplifting—the romance of the residual—this and other accounts of physical abuse, graphic embodiment, and abjection are deeply ambivalent because they emphasize the corporeal cost Gunnar must pay for his assimilation into Hillside culture.

Put differently, what Dubey’s paradigm cannot account for are the moments of instrumentality that sabotage the cultural and communal identities arising from the ashes of material privation in *Shuffle*. That is, the same hyperbolic and pervasive tropes of death, disease, and bodily abjection that often presage more positive moments of collectivization in the novel are also predicated on moments that transform Gunnar (quite literally, in the above scenario) into an instrument. The unique pattern articulating instrumentalization to corporeal ambivalence and communality that *Shuffle* deploys therefore puts a finer point on Dubey’s critique. The problem with this romance, in this light, is not just that it crafts communal identity by idealizing the effects of political and economic marginalization as innate cultural values. Rather, the difficulty is that such idealization results in an essentialist and inflexible type of identity. It is the instrumental use of culture, and not culture per se that makes the romance of the residual so insidious; and it is not the content of cultural identity, but the reductive form cultural identity takes within this paradigm that Beatty satirizes.²⁷ By articulating communality, abjection, and

²⁷ It is this romance, in other words, that sucks the contingency from cultural materialism: reducing Raymond Williams’ delicately balanced trifecta of dominant, residual, and emergent to a stark antithesis between dominant and marginal cultures. The critiques of Dubey, Warren, and Walter Michaels are all united in finding this logic to be highly dubious, taking time to elaborate the continuities that abound between nationalist and postnationalist, multicultural paradigms. Of the three, Dubey is by far the most thorough in demonstrating that cultural politics is no different from older nationalist political programs. In her analysis of the African-American literary and cultural scholarship by Wahneema Lubiano, Doreen Massey, Philip Brian Harper, and bell hooks, she argues that both nationalist and postnationalist critics fall prey to romance of the residual and the essentialization of cultural identity. Like Warren, Dubey is sharply critical of such expressions of intellectual nostalgia, and suggests that critical vocabularies are altered more readily than thoughts. Timely as they are, these commentaries fail to recognize that it is the essentialist structure of identity, and not its content, that serves as the crux

instrumentality *Shuffle* thus takes aim at the broader identitarian alchemy at work within the romance of the residual: the transformation of certain social practices into an identity divorced from historical context. Stripping the contingency from cultural production, essentialist identity forms require that the community and the individual to adapt to and perpetuate them, rather than the reverse. In the guise of creating solidarity and agency, essentialist identitarianism in effect erodes these values, reducing the experimental and improvisational process of community formation to a product—an instrumental identity to be reproduced and disseminated rather than negotiated and adapted.

It is this counterintuitive repackaging of the symptoms of social marginalization as solutions that *Shuffle* stresses through its ambivalent tropes of corporeal embodiment. Localized not just around instances of intracommunal and intrafamilial violence and abuse, but encompassing moments of self-inflicted and autoimmune distress emanating from within, such tropes metaphorically suggest that essentialist identitarianism is what ails the African American community of the novel. By redirecting our attention to the dual essentialization and instrumentalization of identity that undergirds cultural politics, *The White Boy Shuffle* demands a new critical paradigm to account for the essentialist forms of identification subtending postmodern community and subjectivity; moreover, it posits that such a paradigm can preserve the role of cultural and aesthetic production as a means of resisting the crisis mode of cultural politics.

To establish a new, noninstrumental relation between aesthetic production and political debate is to read Gunnar's figuration as suicidal artist-cum-race man as purposively paradoxical, or neoformalist. That is, *Shuffle* consciously seeks to circumvent the absolute identification of culture with politics typical of ideology critique, yet also to avoid the formalist separation of

of cultural politics. Because of this they risk throwing the cultural baby out with the identitarian bathwater as they seek to assuage the enervation and impasses of cultural politics.

aesthetics from the socioeconomic sphere, and in so doing embodies the aims of recent critical theory from neoformalists like Charles Altieri and Ellen Rooney.²⁸ This task of theorizing an aesthetic that is neither completely separate from nor reducible to political critiques requires renewed attention to the relational effects of paradoxical tensions rather than the hasty foreclosure of them. Beatty's text volubly demonstrates how the ethnic American novel, as well as literary and cultural criticism, can move beyond exhaustive attempts to resolve postmodern paradoxes into stable identities by turning instead towards contingent forms of relational collectivity. This shift from positionality to relationality entails, in particular, a complex thickening of our notions of subjectivity. I find the fullest efflorescence of these thick, relational forms of belonging to be in the Actor-Network-Theory of Bruno Latour, and will argue that the postmodern subject is not entangled and diffused within a postmodern network of signs so much as it *is* a postmodern network, its agency derived from mediating its contradictions rather than trying to stabilize or reconcile them. Only then can the deathly and diseased subject go from poison to cure—to embodying a relation between subject *and* object, agency and instrumentalization, so as to combat cultural politics and return contingency to culture.

I. Simulation or Mediation?

Another way to bring my reading of relational, networked, belonging as a solution to the cultural politics of crisis into sharper focus is to place it into a dialog with cultural Marxist accounts of the same. If cultural politics produces ambivalent figurations of the minority body as both suffering the attenuations of political and economic marginalization yet also proving the alchemic site for converting those deprivations into an ontologized and amplified physical

²⁸ Neoformalism is a loosely defined and recently developed area of inquiry, and these critics, although not united beneath this label or in their literary objects of study, have provocatively suggested that what I am calling a neoformalist methodology may serve as a means of navigating the current legitimization crisis in the humanities. Specifically, I interpret neoformalism as leery of reducing cultural production to acts of sociopolitical intervention as they are of reanimating New Critical methods privileging the autotelic nature of the text, these two critics strongly argue for the importance of situating cultural production in relational and epistemological, not ontological and absolutist, terms.

presence, several literary critics have trenchantly linked this phenomenon to commodity fetishism. Reading this increased presence through the intersection of visual culture and cultural Marxism in the work of theorists like Guy Debord, Wolfgang Iser, and Hal Foster, Dubey demonstrates that the use of an innate and magnified corporeality to compensate minorities for their socioeconomic disenfranchisement follows the paradoxical logic common to the commodity fetish: simultaneously ubiquitous as signifier yet absent and disconnected from any concrete location or authentic reality.²⁹ For art critic and theorist Hal Foster, the fetish body reveals the imbrication of commodification and containment, wherein “the other is socially subjected as a sign and made commercially productive as a commodity [so that] the (subcultural) other is at once controlled in its recognition and dispersed in its commodification” (170). Yet several African American literary critics have found a silver lining in this ambivalence attending social subjection and cultural commodification. Espousing the romance of the residual, literary critics Mark Anthony Neal and L.H. Stallings both read the morbid emphasis on death, disease, and physical abjection prevalent in *The White Boy Shuffle* as a way of recoding and resisting the social death represented in commodification, and both attribute to Gunnar a critical position relatively autonomous from the commodity culture around him by virtue of the role of suicidal messiah that he adopts toward the end of the novel. Literary scholar Rolland Murray qualifies these claims, arguing that while this revaluation of the macabre may result in new forms of critical awareness, such new forms of critique necessarily must accept their own complicity in the

²⁹ The homology between Dubey’s romance of the residual and commodity fetishism can be seen in several instances throughout *Shuffle*, but is most notable when Gunnar arrives at his first day of poetry class at Boston University to find that he is to be one of its objects of study. Upon learning that his poetry has found critical acclaim only because it has been transcribed, published, and circulated without his consent he dashes outside, undressing as he traverses campus in an attempt to demonstrate that he has nothing in common with his conspicuously-consuming, mostly-white (and entirely annoying) devotees. Yet far from dampening their enthusiasm with corporeal proof of his difference, Gunnar’s airing his “black lower-middle class” body (180) before these Boston Brahmins only incites them to reify him further; and his classmates ecstatically trail in his wake, picking up his discarded clothes for keepsakes, avidly taking notes, and insisting that he write another book of poetry entitled *Watermelanin*. This scene can be read as one where the romance of the residual echoes commodity fetishism: Gunnar’s enhanced physical presence is portrayed as a sort of compensation for his lack of control over his figuration as a cultural celebrity even though it is predicated upon his further instrumentalization and objectification.

dissolution of authentic cultural identity by its simulative, commodified substitutes.³⁰

This complicity stems, on this account, from the simulative economy of the text, the condition in which postmodern racial identities are now governed by the laws of Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal and are dependent upon commoditized signifiers detached from their original referents.³¹ The simulative economy acts as a double-edged sword: the postmodern subject can enjoy an unprecedented degree of political and aesthetic power only by mobilizing commoditized forms of cultural identity that facilitate the very dissolution of his or her racial difference. This double-edged sword can be seen in *Shuffle*'s depictions of the revenge rituals of two gangs: Gunnar's local group named the Gun Totin' Hooligans; and an ensemble of rap artists recreating the masculinist fantasy of the ghetto for MTV known as the Stoic Undertakers. Both troupes taunt their respective rivals by weaving spectacular displays of urban animosity replete with cool cars and designer goods, their homoerotically-charged braggadocio interlarded with esoteric cultural references. But if both groups have been forced to abandon the moribund memory of racial or cultural authenticity and to experiment with a vast array of commodity forms, only the Hooligans succeed in generating a new communality by doing so. As Gunnar and his friends pull away from the scene of a drive-by, blasting the 1883 French opera *Lakmé* it is clearly they, and not the music industry's touts, that have engineered a proper way to survive the simulacra. Gunnar notes that "none of the boys bothered to remove their wigs or makeup. I placed one hand over my heart and raised the other high in the air and celebrated life by hitting the high notes with the rest of the fellows. Somehow I knew the words" (111). It is this celebration of life, beyond the bounds of fixed identity categories, that becomes the chief

³⁰ Murray 232. For more on postmodern critique as always already complicitous critique, see Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 11-18.

³¹ Baudrillard argues in *Simulacra and Simulation* that within the realm of the hyperreal "the wager of representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning" has been lost (5). For Baudrillard the real world has passed into a hyperreal one governed by a tautological code of constant semiotic exchange, where signifiers freed of their referents are endlessly replicated—thus the social becomes nothing more than the play of signs.

preoccupation, or rather compensation, of those trapped within the simulative economy.

On this cultural Marxist account, such aesthetic performances can never be seen as truly radical or unique, because within the total reification of the hyperreal, all is prefabricated, and aesthetic creativity is delimited by political realities, constrained to acts of pastiche. Foster has coined the term “recoding” to describe such acts as those that translate, manipulate, or otherwise reinvest cultural signs with new meaning, acts that unfortunately can do nothing to change the separation of signifiers from their material realities. The play of signs the Hooligan’s orchestrate, however unorthodox, is always already susceptible to and dependent upon the ongoing commodification of culture around them. On this account any cultural sign, no matter how repurposed or recoded, is still a bad mediation or representation of the real, immediately heralding complicity in the political economies of late capitalism, and its marketing of ethno-racial difference for profit.

Yet new theoretical work on the dialectic problematizes Foster’s and Baudrillard’s earlier arguments, finding them at fault in degree, not kind. Cultural Marxist Timothy Bewes’ argument, for instance, takes issue not with the inevitable fact of reification but rather with its presumed totality. He claims that in a state of absolute reification critical resistance would be impossible, and that in such a scenario as Baudrillard describes we would have neither anxiety nor awareness of the hyperreal. Bewes helpfully demonstrates the fundamental irrationality of these high postmodernist doctrines, and supplants them with a heightened sense of dialectical mediation, “a theoretical desire to take up residence within” paradox (270). To view antimonies neither as irreconcilably divorced, nor as identical and collapsible into one another aligns Bewes’ concept of mediation with a neoformalist emphasis on paradox, and suggests that culture can be thought in ways that exceed the simulative economy.

This version of mediation as constitutive interconnection has found its fullest incarnation, not in post-Marxist critiques, but rather within Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (ANT),

which finds the social to be comprised of two types of connectivity: mediation and intermediation. Mediation connotes any sort of connection that facilitates agency, whereas intermediation is associated with bonds that confer subordination, objectification, and instrumentalization. This is because mediaries, by dint of their own creative transformations of cultural values and practices, inspire others around them to do the same and continue manipulating, contextualizing, and adapting the codes of cultural identity. Intermediaries tacitly encourage a more conventional and predictable relationship to cultural forms, promoting the careful preservation and transmission of paradigms over conventional, yet more stable, types of connection. That is, mediaries and intermediaries each have a very different effect on those around them: mediaries create other actors, who manipulate, translate, and play with the cultural norms they have been given; whereas intermediaries devote themselves to the preservation and dissemination of a cultural code. In this light, the Gun Totin' Hooligans that emerge as mediators crafting a drive-by like no other: dressed in drag, blaring nineteenth-century arias of undying love as they attack their rivals with flaming arrows and water balloons filled with Drain-o. The Hooligans, far from merely mobilizing or recoding a number of highly circulated forms of contemporary femininity and nineteenth-century colonialism, have transformed Delibes' orientalist opera—depicting the ill-fated love affair between Lakmé, the daughter of a local Brahmin, and Gerald, a British Officer during the Raj—to reflect their own creative iteration of community. Delibes' forlorn lovers do indeed declare their undying devotion in Act II, but contrary to the explanation that the Hooligan's leader gives Gunnar following the drive-by, they do not die there. Delibes' opera is comprised of three acts, and Lakmé does indeed perish poignantly in her lover's arms by the close of the curtain, but only after she realizes that he will always choose his duty to his fellow officers over his love for her. Like Delibes' lovers, the rival gangs may swear that they will die for one another and by each other's hand (as their history of internecine retaliation suggests)—but ultimately Gerald does not follow Lakmé in gulping the

poisonous draught, and the Hooligans' arrows, like their rivals' buckshot, bounce harmlessly off the concrete. The Hooligans merge the roles of the dark lady and the British soldier into one, in order to claim both Lakmé's death as well as the soldierly affirmation of the brotherly bond as their own. This is not the act of mere pastiche of cultural values, but of dynamic mediation and translation of cultural signs to reflect idiosyncratic realities. Mediary cultural production therefore is not purchased at the expense of communal solidarity, but facilitates it.

The connections forged between mediaries are radically unpredictable, whereas on the reverse, the links between intermediaries always follow the same conventional blueprint. To borrow a term from the discourse of cybernetics, intermediaries effectively “black box” and stabilize the things they carry.³² Intermediaries are thus instrumental to the safe circulation and proliferation of any cultural ideal. Black boxes can travel far—both spatially and temporally—but it is important not to mistake movement for agency, which is precisely what befalls the simulacra in Baudrillard's treatise. Baudrillard may warn “here comes the great Culture of tactile communication, under the sign of techno-lumino-kinetic space and total spatio-dynamic theater” (*Symbolic* 71), but the theater here cannot be used to connote the stage, only the screens of cinema and television, for Baudrillard's signs are only unchanging projections that promote nothing more than their own proliferation. Thus stabilization and proliferation of cultural paradigms, and not the transformation of them, is the provenance of intermediaries.

The contrast between intermediary and mediary communal bonds becomes clearer if we consider an earlier performance of inner city enmity that Gunnar witnesses during the production of the Undertakers' music video. In this scene, the Undertakers recycle tired tropes of urban nihilism—complete with vintage cars, assault weaponry, and interlarded with homoerotic and

³² Used to simplify the linkages between several complicated machines in laboratory experiments, the black box emerged as a type of diagrammatic shorthand: only its inputs and outputs mattered, and not the inner workings that produced them. The black box is a no-man's-land, temporarily occluded for practicality's sake to allow greater focus elsewhere. In *Science in Action* Latour expanded the cybernetic black box to include any machine, claim, or bit of common knowledge that goes unquestioned: a routine function, in other words. Latour understands black boxes to be a testament to the fact that instrumentalization is unavoidable and, to some degree, necessary.

hyperbolically violent lyrics. It is an impressive spectacle, yet it transforms nothing and transfigures no one in turn. That is, Gunnar's head may "reflexively" begin to bob (78), but the rappers' performance is ultimately dismissed as mere reiteration, "retelling stories passed down from chicken coop to apartment stoop to Ford coupe" (79). Gunnar's mother Brenda posits that the rappers' work may not be so different from the way poetry is produced, from the "echoes of the voices in your head and from your past" precipitated by "your ancestors speaking to you and through you" (79). Aesthetic production, on this intermediary account, serves to instrumentalize and deemphasize the role of the poet or musical artist, using him or her as a means of expressing a more important ahistorical essence or meaning unharmed from coop to coupe, from father to son. It is worth nothing that, both before and following this conflation of aesthetic expression and reduplication, the rosy-hued rhetoric of ancestral echoes is bracketed by the figuration of contagion. Noting both that his body began to rock like someone in the throes of either substance abuse or "an inner ear infection" in response to the Undertakers' music, Gunnar muses that "maybe poems are like colds...my body temperature would fluctuate, and a ringing in my ears would herald the coming of a timeless verse" (79). The tropes of viral conscription, here interwoven with intermediary cultural production, serve to figure Gunnar as a vector reacting reflexively, not reflectively, to the reproduction and proliferation of the black box, the traditional cultural identity he confronts in Hillside.

Yet what Latour's account of intermediation and mediation, transmission and translation, cannot prepare the reader for is the corporeal violence that frequently accompanies these privileged forms of intermediation within the black community of Beatty's novel. For instance, *Shuffle* relates the means by which Gunnar's father Rölf perpetuates the Kaufman lineage in explicitly incestuous and physically abusive terms: for Gunnar, this legacy is depicted as an "autogamous self-pollinating men's club" (23) and "a reprobate ancestry that...kissed me on the back of the neck, plopped its dick in my hands, and asked me to blow reveille" (21). Gunnar's

attempt to think about race, culture, and color on his own terms is thus ruthlessly foreclosed. His flirtation with a white schoolmate, Eileen, is pertinent because it prompts the first nonlinear prose segment of the text, departing formally from narration of the Kaufman mythology as it proposes an alternative color theory. This “expulsion of colors encumbered by self-awareness and pigment” (35) comes to an abrupt end, and even appears to trigger Rölf’s wrath, in a passage which is worth quoting at length:

Black was a suffocating bully that tied my mind behind my back and shoved me into a walk-in closet. Black was my father on a weekend custody drunken binge, pushing me around as if I were a twelve-year-old, seventy-five-pound bell clapper clanging hard against the door, the wall, the shoe tree. Black is a repressed memory of a sandpapery hand rubbing abrasive circles into the small of my back, my face rising and falling in time with a hairy heaving chest. Black is the sound of metal hangers sliding away in fear, my shirt halfway off, hula-hooping around my neck.

□

The summer of my molestation, my sister Christina returned from a YMCA day camp field trip in tears. (36, section break in original)

A violent paternal force emerges at precisely the moment when Gunnar is textually most in danger of forming a miscegenous attachment. The beating serves to sequester him from Eileen’s blue-eyed gaze, which cuts into Gunnar like a beacon “lancing into midnight” (34), and reestablishes him in his role as Kaufman male. Gunnar’s dalliance, with both Eileen as well as multicultural Santa Monica, endangers his role as Kaufman intermediary, and threatens to turn him into a mediary who will distort the precious cultural heritage he has been given to carry. The latent sexual violence of this scene, effectively ending Gunnar’s nonlinear prose experiment, and precipitating the family’s move towards the more “traditional black experience” (46) afforded by Hillside, illustrates how corporeality serves as the metonymic means for binding and regulating the sexual, aesthetic, and cultural forms of (re)production in *Shuffle*. Instead of being lanced by light, the black box is shut upon his arrival, and Gunnar is an intermediary who is “in a world where body and spoken language were currency, broke as hell. Corporeally mute” (52). *Shuffle* can thus be seen to juxtapose two very different explanations of the role cultural and aesthetic

production play in communal belonging. The first, epitomized by the Hooligans, shows of the active manipulation and recreation of the cultural forms of representation can be used to reflect changing social realities in order to strengthen communal bonds. Yet these mediary performances exist uneasily alongside the intermediary cultural (re)productions like the Kaufman genealogy or Undertakers' music video. Instead of allowing cultural forms and social realities to reciprocally react to one another, intermediation subordinates the latter in the service of the former, forcibly reducing the social body to an instrument for transmitting cultural paradigms.

II. Thick Subjectivity

This is not to say that the shift between intermediary and mediary is a permanent one, or even total. We are all simultaneously both mediators and intermediaries, interacting with multiple traditions, paradigms, and signs at once. *Shuffle* depicts this through the figuration of Gunnar as “a cultural alloy, tin-hearted whiteness wrapped in blackened copper plating” (63). Like Gunnar, we are agential alloys, so to speak—transmitting some concepts for practicality's sake while simultaneously enrolling ourselves in other agential imbroglios. This Latourian simultaneity of both objectification and agency is often mistaken as reiterating cultural Marxist accounts like Terry Eagleton's, which attribute the difficult political situation of the postmodern subject to its paradoxical status as a “contradictory amalgam” of both modernism's autonomous individual and the reified subject of late capitalism (132). Instead, my argument bears a closer relation to what Rita Felski describes as “the sheer thickness of subjectivity” that emerges by way of figuring political and aesthetic literary critical projects into a more intimate, and less combative relationship (11-12). *Shuffle*, I argue, is accomplishing just such a move as it traces Gunnar's repudiation of cultural and identity politics through an aesthetic of abjection, foregrounding the violent conscription of the physical body in the face of intermediary cultural production. In the earlier passage detailing these cultural compulsions as contagion, Gunnar is more than the

mouthpiece for ancestral echoes, or petri dish for poetic colds, in that he satirically mocks the decontextualization of these cultural essences with the return of the real, material bodies it attempts to subjugate. In betraying the mechanics of cultural politics by bringing the disqualified material world back to the fore, *Shuffle* is also demonstrating that this division of the postmodern subject into agent and instrument is not always a disqualifying condition. The word “abject” need not necessarily connote pain and suffering so much as it does the sense that Julia Kristeva posited, the status of being both subject and object—or in my account, mediary and intermediary. Thus I interpret the ailing ethnic body as denoting a category of thickened critical consciousness that allows for a more nuanced account dwelling within, rather than resolving, this subjective paradox.

Incapable of intensely questioning and refashioning each and every paradigm encountered on a daily basis, the abject body acts as an object transmitting some black boxes, even while it is simultaneously an agent opening others. For instance, Gunnar is depicted as mediating nearly everything from particle physics to commodification and black feminism in his narrative account, armed only with his copy of Audre Lorde or his science homework. Yet at other times he is an intermediary, not questioning, say, the dismantling of the Great Society coalition, geothermal climate change, or Newton’s Laws—else he’d be too preoccupied with the anti-tax legacy of California’s Proposition 13, his carbon footprint, or gravity’s machinations to even cross the street. The publication of Gunnar’s first poem, eleven stanzas written in aerosol paint on decidedly prosaic concrete walls, ably demonstrates this agential duality. Although tagging is a common enough pastime in Hillside, Gunnar’s graffiti derives its vitality from translating, and not transmitting, the sounds of the world around him. Stanzas depicting the “ghetto muses” Calliope, Clio, Thalia, Euterpe, Melpomene, and Urania (85)—all dead, hushed, or drugged—are interspersed with the stanzas relating the speaker’s quest to hear their voices. This alternating pattern is broken in the seventh stanza, where the muse’s space is usurped by the

speaker himself: “i have a notion/that if i could translate/ the slobbering bellows of Ray-Ray/ the ubiquitous retarded boy's/ swollen-tongued incantations/ i'd find Melpomene reciting the day's obituaries” (86). This moment can be read as a poetic instantiation of the shift from intermediary to mediary: the speaker abandons the quest for an inspirational gift from without, relinquishing the search for a muse to speak through him, and realizes that the only way to conjure her is by translating the quotidian world around him. The speaker of Gunnar's poem transforms the cryptic “s.o.s. a.p.b. 911 electronic prayers” that go unanswered by the Muses, or the confusing and unpredictable correspondence between the divine and the mundane, into the impetus for his own poetic voice.

This act of mediation within the poem triggers mediation in the world of the poet as well. Gunnar is more than just another intermediary recreating a ghettoized art form, trafficking in commoditized forms of blackness, he becomes a mediary when he twists the conventions of urban graffiti available to him (as well as the stencils his accommodationist great-great-uncle Wolfgang used to fabricate home-made Jim Crow signs) to create a stirring poetic message that we later learn will reach readers far beyond Hillside. It is eventually photographed and transcribed, along with the other poems he paints, to be sold around the world and earn him international acclaim. Yet I argue that this proliferation of Gunnar's work does not necessarily mark the “disappearance of the poet's voice ... within the commodity form” (Murray 225). Gunnar and his poems simply act as intermediaries in some scenarios and as agents or mediaries in others. At times his poems are anthologized and sold on the market without his consent or knowledge, but at others they exist only ephemerally as he recites them at the grave of a friend, or writes them on his wife's bare back with his index finger. His poetic voice, in short, can neither be achieved nor lost in a single moment of commodification, just as the community for which he is (albeit reluctantly) a speaker, cannot be rendered ontologically complete nor completely dispersed by any single act.

Whether the abject body is read as the symptom or as the cure for cultural politics, as fatalistic or redemptive, depends on considering the effects they have on those around them. Consider the letter Gunnar writes to his Japanese wife Yoshiko when he is playing an away basketball game for Boston University, before their daughter Naomi is born. It is a half-time missive that is peppered with phrases in romaji, the westernized form of the Japanese alphabet. The letter gets more and more bizarre as the romaji phrases stray further and further from the content written in English. For instance, he writes “Now I pretend you're always there right next to me ... on the bench. Do you hear me? *Ikaga desu ka? Mai asa nani o shimasu? Asahan ni sakana o tabemasu ka? Senakao sasurishoka?* Sometimes I'll be dribbling up-court and I'll hear your voice” (193-4). What the Japanese here translates to is: “How is it? What shall we do each morning? Do you want fish for breakfast? Should I give you a back rub?” (Katz). The digression here somewhat on topic, as after all, Gunnar is wishing that they were together and therefore the subjunctive emphasis on what they could be doing is not completely untoward. His letter goes on further to relate his best friend Nicolas Scoby's response to the tragic end two lovers meet in a Chikamatsu play they read together traveling to the game:

Nicolas weeps with the star-crossed lovers. “I know what it feels like to live in a world where you can't live your dreams. I'd rather die too. Why can't they leave us alone?” ... I'm beginning to see the sheer casual genius of Chikamatsu writing for the puppet theatre. If I blur my eyes I can see the black strings attached to my joints and stretching to the skies. Ah, the freedom of fatalism. Now I can do what the fuck I want and blame it on the puppet-master. *Watakushi wa nodo ga kawakimashita. Biru o ni hon miraimasho.* Nicholas sees the strings, but he spends all his time looking for a pair of scissors. Every now and then the puppet-master hands him a pair of wooden scissors ... and Scoby thinks he's free, thinks he's clipped his strings. The slack string is just a slack string. (194)

On one level, this passage is devastating. As an intermediary like so many other youths from Hillside, Scoby's fantastic talent on the basketball court (he never, ever, misses a shot) has objectified him and robbed him of the ability to live his dreams, prompting Gunnar to muse that the only freedom lies in fatalism and complete irresponsibility. Yet the melodrama of the scene is

abruptly halted when you consider the Japanese translation: “I am thirsty. Let's drink two beers” (Katz). Now it seems as if Beatty had been taking snatches from *Lonely Planet Japanese Phrasebook* and randomly inserting them into Gunnar and Yoshiko's conversations, effectively ruining the pathos of the lines that precede them. Yet a check on the other uses of romaji in the text shows them to be contextually suitable—the only place in which Gunnar's use of Japanese becomes unwieldy or completely baffling is in this letter, the last and longest letter he is to write in the novel. The inclusion of the absurd phrases prompts us to reread the passage ironically. What then, does Gunnar really mean to say about freedom and fatalism?

Latour would interpret this passage as enacting the shift from causality to uncertainty that is correspondent to the shift from intermediation to mediation:

When a force manipulates another, it does not mean that it is a cause generating effects; it can also be an occasion for other things to start acting. The *hand* still hidden in the Latin etymology of the word 'manipulate' is a sure sign of full control *as well as a lack of it*. So who is pulling the strings? Well, the puppets do in addition to their puppeteers. It does not mean that puppets are controlling their handlers—this would be simply reversing the order of causality—and of course no dialectic will do the trick either. It simply means that the interesting question at this point is not to decide who is acting and how but to shift from a certainty about action to an uncertainty about action. (*Reassembling* 60, emphasis original)

Gunnar is thus not advocating the freedom of fatalism that a hyperreal, intermediary stance would espouse—instead he is questioning the very causal reduction that subtends it. Who, exactly, is behind the vast force of the social system that detaches each cultural sign from its referent and circulates it so promiscuously? Who is pulling Scoby's strings? My reading of postmodern subjectivity requires that we focus on seeing mediaries where before there were only black boxes and intermediaries, and stop reading the free play of signs as causal and instead see the simulative economy as any other black box: a product forged on a field of forces where agents act in tandem. “The” slack string is simply “a” slack string—it is one connection among many, acting as a two way street—and we must never mistake the fact of association for a monolithic force calling all of the shots. In the passage above, some of Gunnar's words are

simply unintelligible blocks to the non-Japanese speaker, prompting the reader with a choice: pass the black box on unquestioningly, or open it up and find out what it really means. Beatty's presentation of a character that is mediary and intermediary, translator and transliterator, is doing more than pulling our legs...or strings. It is prompting us to pull back.

III. Bad Textual Accounts and the Nonhuman Network

This is to say that by looking skeptically at cultural black boxes, *Shuffle* gives readers good textual accounts to train them to be more astute mediaries of postmodern politics. This is opposed to a bad textual account, which relies too heavily on intermediaries, and thinks ahistorically and apolitically in terms of monolithic forces. Good accounts, however, do not obviate the fact of intermediation, they simply take both intermediation and mediation, transmission and translation, into their account of the social. To say that Marxian accounts of the commodification of culture and communal belonging are “bad” in an ANT sense is not to say that they do not obtain—indeed, my intent is not to reiterate the naïve stance that commodification does not pose a significant threat to structures of belonging in minority communities. Rather, I submit that such accounts are bad because they mistake intermediary cultural production for the whole of cultural production. In the Baudrillardian hyperreal, for instance, the semiotic system based on a nonreciprocal exchange “is regulated by a providential code that watches over the correlation of the object” to its use value (*For A Critique* 133). But while this code forms the backbone of Baudrillard’s political economy of the sign, details as to its specifics—from whence it came, who proliferates it, how it has evolved over time—are rather sparse. The only code ANT recognizes motivating social organization, however, is the fact of association or connection, broken as discussed previously into two types, mediation and intermediation. Association is no guarantee for continuity and stability of any generalizable sort of system (semiotic, symbolic, or otherwise) the opposite is true, in fact. For Latour the actor-network is always comprised of two

irreducible pieces: the actor and the network, or carriers and the ties that bind them to each other. The Baudrillardian hyperreal therefore does not contradict ANT, but merely represents a type of bad textual account. As such, the hyperreal focuses on relatively stable connections that preserve and reproduce cultural paradigms, or intermediary bonds, to the exclusion of the acts of mediation that are also taking place alongside them.

If intermediary accounts of cultural production are bad because they view culture as governed by a mysterious force or semiotic code, a more sophisticated variant on the bad account emerges when Scoby decides to disrupt the simulative economy by substituting one form of encryption for another. This finds its fullest incarnation in his attempt to protect certain cherished cultural artifacts, like the jazz music he adores, from commodification. Contemplating the black Atlantic alongside Gunnar on the night he takes his own life, Scoby attributes infiniteness to music, a quality he claims the written word lacks. Specifically,

Time is what makes music infinite. ... if Charlie Parker had played Dixie, it would be like colorizing *Birth of a Nation*. It'd be a different tune but the same tune. You dig? You'd be hearing it differently and its meaning would change. Because a musician has they own sense of time and experience of time. ... Music is life itself. Music is time. Played live, played at seventy-eight rpms, thirty-three and a third, backwards, looped, whatever. There's no need for translation. You understand or you don't. (204-5)

Performer and music seem to be transforming each other here: the fact that the music lives, that music just *is*, and that its meaning comes to fruition performatively grant it all the earmarks of a mediary. To understand the meaning of the cultural artifact Scoby studies neither chords nor the individual notes but rather the experience of time the artist infuses his piece with, his phrasing. “Dixie” can thus remain the same yet also differ from itself because its meaning is dependent upon the individual artist’s sense of time. Yet Scoby’s elaborate tautology circles a dilemma: if each musician’s personal experience of music/life/time (a problematic equivalency in and of itself) can change the meaning of a musical piece, then an audience can only understand the performance by sharing in those same experiences, and not by interpreting the performance’s

empirical aspects. The material and sensorial valence of the aesthetic performance, the sequence of notes, the key, melody, and even the individual performer, matter least in such bad accounts. What does matter is that the meaning contained within the music be preserved at all costs, inviolate from the machinations of the simulative economy by virtue of its recourse to an intangible and untranslatable sort of communal experience.

In this regard, Scoby's pithy assertion that either "You understand or you don't" deftly substitutes the semiotic code of Baudrillard's hyperreal with a vaguely defined force known as communal experience, a force similar to the one Kenneth Warren terms the "cultural experiential claim" that he credits with stymying much of Ralph Ellison's later work (*So Black* 103). For example, in "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia" Ellison describes the gospel music of Mahalia Jackson as thrillingly evocative, and dismisses her secular performances for their marked departure from what he identifies as the "true function" of her art: "to evoke a shared community of experience" and prepare the congregation for the minister's message (219). This experience is essentialized, however, when it is depicted as an automatic and unanimous response on the part of Jackson's church-going audience. Understanding the meaning or message of Parker's or Jackson's songs is therefore dependent upon a decontextualized and naturalized definition of experience, a move that has preserved the logic of racial essentialism while merely changing the variables used to compute it. The formula remains the same, and thus Mahalia Jackson and Charlie Parker, for all their performative *puissance*, are portrayed in both Ellison's and Scoby's accounts as intermediaries, and not agents, because they invoke an experiential force to stabilize the meaning linked to certain cultural forms of expression.

In both instantiations of the cultural/experiential claim, the aesthetic performance is instrumentalized to black box, encode, and otherwise facilitate the essentialization of black cultural experience, ostensibly to protect it from the ravages of the simulative economy. Although Scoby may chide Gunnar that his thoughts, once put on the page, become finite and

ossified, in reality it is his understanding of cultural expression that has been rendered immobile and reductive. Isolated from change and growth, cultural identity becomes on this account a force or thing faithfully carried by its intermediary disciples. In contrast, Gunnar illustrates how meaning becomes more mutable once artistic experience is sidelined by other nonhuman participants. After Scoby and he part, Gunnar remains on the beach listening to a tape of the vocalist Sarah Vaughn, whose recording becomes increasingly garbled as the cassette player's batteries die. The sounds, Gunnar notes, turn “inside out, between [his] ears instead of outside of them. Nothing was making any sense” (205). This moment of internalizing Vaughn's performance, however, does not lead to a better understanding of Vaughn, her milieu, or her music. Instead, it prompts the composition of a poem on the train ride home:

Is this song/tune/anthem inherently racist?

...

If “Dixie” is racist, what makes it so? The title, the lyrics, the historical context, the fact the South lost the war? If the lyrics were outlawed, banned forever, would the music, the gnawing fucking refrain, the sequence of notes themselves, be racist instrumental? Is opera classist? Does the letter *r* discriminate against Bostonians? (205)

Ever the mediary, instead of making an esoteric experiential claim on the music, like Scoby, Gunnar questions the manner in which a particular sequence of notes is black boxed to portray the cultural meaning closely associated with them as an inherent quality. In this light, the problem is not that “Dixie” contains a “racist instrumental” but that it has been instrumentalized by racists as an index for bigotry. Gunnar undoes this by wondering how the song itself, and not just its performers, creates and perpetuates the racist ideology associated with it. Here he renders sound as an agential participant in the creation of cultural meaning, and critically disrupts the stable relationship between the cultural message within the song and the musicians and audiences that passively send and receive that message. Gunnar, in other words, implodes Scoby's tautology to multiply the strings and introduce a whole host of other actors—the title, lyrics, historical

context, and structure of the song—all of whom invite renewed scrutiny from the audience and threaten to pull “Dixie” away from its established meaning and usage. Thus the fact of association becomes once more contingent, not causal, which in turn spurs free play on the part of the poet.

The instrumentalization underlying aesthetic performance in the cultural/experiential claim is also the logic that licenses the turn towards mass suicide in the novel. Gunnar inadvertently sparks the macabre movement during the rally at Boston University’s campus to divest a corrupt African statesman of a hefty university honorarium, in which Gunnar riffs off of Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous assertion when he admits “I’m not willing to die for South Africa, and you ain’t either... Matter of fact, I ain’t ready to die for anything, so I guess I’m just not fit to live. In other words, I’m just ready to die. I’m just ready to die” (200). This declaration echoes Baudrillard’s theory on suicide as a means of redress within the hyperreal, which capitalizes on a vestigial promise of symmetrical exchange that haunts the semiotic order’s asymmetrical, simulative economy.³³ The only recourse those trapped within the simulative have, according to Baudrillard, is to trick the exchange system into self-destruction with the symbolic act of suicide, since “[n]othing *corresponds* to death except death. Which is precisely what happens in this case: *the system itself is driven to suicide in return*, which suicide is manifest in its disarray and defeat” (*Symbolic* 37, emphasis original). Thus Scoby’s leap off the roof of the university’s law school shortly after the rally initially takes on the valence of an heroic act, a last-ditch effort to subvert the commoditization of black cultural identity. In his suicide note, Scoby relates that he has finally realized his most cherished dream—to witness his own “personal

³³ In Baudrillard’s figuration the more primitive system of symbolic exchange, which privileged symmetrical equivalencies between agents, was usurped by the semiotic system of signs. In the latter, the arbitrary and asymmetrical attachments of signifier and signified “institute a [system] of linear, non-reciprocal exchange” to create of the simulative economy (*For a Critique* 18).

glory” (69) through his Brocken Specter, a rare play of light that enables a viewer from a high vantage to see their enlarged shadow enshrouded by a halo of light. Yet Scoby’s sacrifice accomplishes nothing, and his suicide note becomes fodder for media syndicates when it is found and published on front pages nationally the next day. Thus this idealized version of revolutionary suicide, as Murray notes, is just the manifestation of facile nostalgia for a modernist politics of authenticity and subjective autonomy. The Brocken Specter is just another optical illusion, after all.

Beatty’s text ultimately rejects the intermediary logic portraying suicide as agential, and takes several steps to convert Scoby’s bad textual account into a good one. This entails increasing and lengthening the chain of mediaries and fostering agency by embracing the negativity of the network and allowing for uncertainty once more. Crafting his own tribute to Scoby, Gunnar transforms Reynier Park—the scene of many a beating in his corporeally mute days—into a site where intermediaries are transformed into mediators. It becomes the hub of what Gunnar dubs the “MiseryFests,” which began with the public birth of his and Yoshiko’s child, conducted one night under the panoptic spotlight of a hovering LAPD chopper. The MiseryFests quickly become a weekly event, open-mikes where Hillside’s residents gather to read poetry, sing, lecture, debate, and barter on a proscenium improvised beneath the gratis stage lighting provided by continuous police surveillance. Eventually the MiseryFests grow and attract media sponsorship—but the broadcast rights are only given under strict conditions. Money generated by the MiseryFests is funneled directly back into the Hillside community: in the form of a new amphitheater; the use of “only colored camerapersons and support staff” (221); and most crucially, the assurance that every broadcast will be live and uncut. The MiseryFests, in this light, are not the display of puppets onstage, dancing for their media-masters to create a marketable product, instead they evince a mangling and multiplication of the strings, until we cannot tell who is pulling whom, nor how far a tug can be passed down the line of mediaries. The same audience

that is momentarily “anesthetized” (221) by one of Gunnar's epic poems is also the one that shoves junkies up on stage during the “Community Stigmas” (218), and revels in taking an active role in contributing the content of the MiseryFests. The communal is not a thing to be isolated, packaged, and broadcast here, but a quality of a connection forged between actors. Actors and intermediaries are not themselves social per se, rather create the social in the linkages they form. To speak of the negativity of these associational bonds is to refer to their contingency, constant movement, and change as producing a radically uncertain form of communal belonging. What is created by the Hillside community is mode of negative sociality: a network more concerned with the formal negotiation of identity and belonging than it is in reproducing fossilized forms of cultural identity.

At Gunnar's penultimate performance he mutilates himself onstage, cutting off his pinky finger as “a small sacrifice and show of appreciation to Nick Scoby,” and to anyone else who cared (222). Murray reads this scene as Gunnar's continued rejection of the bodily instrumentality of modernist politics, a moment that simultaneously demonstrates the inescapability of the simulacra because Gunnar couples his act of appreciation to a cinematic image: completing the ceremony “exactly as I'd seen Robert Mitchum do in some American yakuza movie” (223). The context of Gunnar's appropriation lends it a far richer meaning than the image of Mitchum in *The Yakuza*, however. In the 1975 film that depicts Mitchum's execution of *yubitsume*, a ceremonial form of atonement, he severs his finger and presents it to his Japanese host in what reads as an imperialist apology for the US occupation of Japan following World War II. Gunnar, conversely, performs his act in front of 20,000 audience members and countless virtual viewers, using *yubitsume* to challenge and shame his neoimperial oppressors into action. With this in mind, I find that Gunnar's act is no mere simulacral appropriation or recoding of an image, but an agential translation and transformation of another cultural paradigm to suit his own ends. In so doing he is not so much losing a finger as he is

metaphorically cutting into yet another black box—the stereotyped black body—that he has been forced to carry.

What Gunnar calls for, by the end of the text, is not suicide, but assisted suicide. There is a difference, so to speak, between the symbolic death Baudrillard espouses and the way in which Gunnar flatly dares the government of the United States to drop an atomic bomb on Hillside. The strings are inescapable, as Latour writes “but they transport autonomy or enslavement depending on *how* they are held ... as to emancipation, it does not mean 'freed from bonds' but *well-attached*” (*Reassembling* 218). For Black America to be truly freed from its oppressors entails not severing but rather multiplying and changing the quality of the bonds between them. Gunnar thereby challenges the rest of America to make a new pact, to forge a new relationship with a Black America comprised of mediators. Their suicide, their removal from history, cannot be a lone act—it must be a joint creation, and new translation of the relationship between the two Americas. It is only in the shadow of the ultimate weapon that both Anglo- and African America can both be full agents and fully embrace their uncertain futures through the network. This exhibits exactly why Latour uses the phrase “risky account” interchangeably with “good textual account,” precisely because through this readmission of uncertainty between mediators it “can easily fail—and does fail most of the time—since it *can put aside neither the complete artificiality of the enterprise nor its claim to accuracy and truthfulness*” (*Reassembling* 133). Artificial yet truthful, relational yet not relativist, a nonhumanist thick subjectivity entails embracing the abject construction of the postmodern subject, and using it to demystify and democratize the essentialization and instrumentalization of cultural identity. The nonhumanist sociality that results has not moved us from where we started—the strings are still there, but this time, we've come to realize that we too can hold them. Awaiting death, as an actor, has become the only way to live.

CHAPTER TWO

“THAT PERSISTENT MIND-BODY PROBLEM”: TIMELESS BODIES OF PLURALISM IN *APEX HIDES THE HURT*

On the subject of the limp, the physician was adamant in his diagnosis. There was no reason for it. The human body is an adaptable instrument, the doctor told him. The mind is less so, he told himself.
Apex Hides the Hurt (200-1)

There had been a moment a few hours ago, as he was lying in bed waiting for the morning to come, when he thought he might be cured. Rid of that persistent mind-body problem. That if he did something, took action, the hex might come off. The badness come undone [...but] as the weeks went on and he settled into his new life, he had to admit that actually, his foot hurt more than ever.
ibid. (212)

The second passage above depicts the final deliberations of a “nomenclature consultant” tasked with finding a suitable new name for a faded Midwestern town in Colson Whitehead’s third novel *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006). It is a recuperative tale in that both the town and the consultant have undergone similarly drastic reversals of fortune, and both linger in nameless suspension as they jointly struggle to reinvent themselves. The town, formerly known as Winthrop, was once a lively industrial center incorporated during Reconstruction following a profitable alliance between emancipated freemen and white capital. This prosperity, however, soon gave way to prototypical rust belt decline in the latter half of the twentieth century. Heartened by the prospect of luring dot-com capital its way with cheap land, tax incentives, and a catchy new sobriquet, the town council has hired a consultant, the protagonist, to arbitrate the

three-way deadlock over what that name will be. The consultant, another of Whitehead's unnamed, urbane, and disaffected young black professionals, has taken the unusual assignment because it presents an opportunity for him to regain the confidence he lost following an injury whose effects were personally and professionally devastating.

The passages above are representative of the novel's skepticism regarding the possibility or value of recuperating after such injuries, lending new irony to the text's own name. The novel's title is taken from the moniker, "Apex," the consultant bestowed upon an immensely successful new brand of multicultural band-aid, whose availability in a wide variety of skin-tones allow it to "hide the hurt" better than the competition's monochromatic product. Prior to taking the assignment in Winthrop, the consultant had let a trivial injury, a stubbed toe, go untreated beneath one such multihued bandage. The ease with which the injury was camouflaged exacerbated the infection it concealed, resulting in a fever and the consultant's public collapse at the annual Identity Awards, after which he was rushed to the hospital and the gangrenous digit amputated. Seduced by his own rhetoric and betrayed by the very product that had brought him the present accolades, the consultant is loath to return to work following his discharge. Instead he ruminates at home, attempting to surmount his shame as well as the psychosomatic effects of his injury, phantom pains and a limp that neither he nor his physicians can explain away. As the final passage above indicates, this "persistent mind body problem" plaguing the protagonist remains conspicuously unresolved at the close of the novel, with the text suggesting that it must remain so.

Unlike more familiar narratives of therapeutic communality, such as Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or Jeffrey Eugenides *Middlesex*, Colson Whitehead's novels, like those of a number of other authors, including Chang-rae Lee, Danzy Senna, Alejandro Morales, John Edgar Wideman, and Louise Erdrich, take the opposite tack. In these novels, attempted acts of healing, associated with efforts to conceive an interethnic and

multicultural community, typically fail or have ambivalent effects. In *Apex*, the consultant's foot hurts more, and not less, after he unifies Winthrop under a new name. Pointedly, such novels suggest that an uncomplicated and idyllic wholeness is not what awaits the characters at the close of these other narratives: community, in other words, is not the cure. Only an uncertain recovery—shadowed by struggle, doubt, and loss—arises. An interesting question for contemporary criticism is what purpose can these anti-therapeutic narratives serve, and why do they appear to articulate irresolvable pathology with communal flux and crisis?

I will argue here that it is not actually community per se that is scrutinized by these texts but the means by which we forge it. It is not the overt, concrete, and material *facts* of communality, but rather the *acts* of identification that engender such collectives that emerge as paramount. Notably, for example, the protagonists of Whitehead's *Apex* and the earlier *John Henry Days* progress from an easy-going, disengaged multiculturalism to a more active and fluid construction of their multiethnic communities, and they do so through their engagement with unruly and ailing bodies. In attaching physical pathology to multicultural ideology, authors like Whitehead intimate that something is deeply awry within our post-racial millennial moment. The literary emphasis on a slow and insidious pathogenesis is specifically intended, I would suggest, to evoke a social body that is likewise beset by some unresolved and willfully ignored problem that festers with neglect. In particular, these novels suggest that it is multiculturalism itself that ironically ails society, a view congruent with that of various political theorists and cultural critics who regard it to be a hegemonic device reinforcing, rather than challenging, the political, social, and economic status quo.

Skeptics of cultural politics, such as political theorists Wendy Brown and Adolph Reed and literary critics Kenneth Warren, Walter Michaels, and Madhu Dubey, have pointed out that the material effects of political and economic disenfranchisement in minority communities continue unabated alongside the recognition and celebration of their cultures. They argue that this

continued disempowerment is the result of a multiculturalist ideology that privileges abstract cultural values, beliefs, and practices over more concrete, substantive criteria and concerns as a foundation for collective identities. The mind-body problem hampering Whitehead's protagonists is intended to highlight this contradictory ambivalence that lies at the heart of neoliberal multiculturalism. Put differently, the persistence of the unruly and ailing physical body echoes the manner in which bleak material realities contradict narratives of cultural exchange and production promulgated by multiculturalism. The pathological body thus offers a unique critical perspective on cultural politics that other critiques of postnationalist ethnic American literary and cultural production have overlooked.

The mind-body problem therefore has the capacity to function as a powerful pluralist device: it troubles the stable and reified identity forms disseminated by multiculturalism by introducing alternative forms of belonging based in liminality.³⁴ As a mediating term between fixity and contingency, in other words, the pathological body can potentially facilitate a shift from superficial multiculturalism to actual diversity by foregrounding the need for continual uncertainty, struggle, and debate. This valorization of contingent identity as producing more robust, engaged communities suggests importantly that it is the inverse, or the essentialism of identity (and not related issues like dematerialization, demobilization, privatization, depoliticization, or historicism) that is the chief mechanism powering multiculturalism. The task of this chapter will be to explain how tropes of pathological embodiment are congruent with a refashioning of multicultural crises in referentiality and historicity in literary criticism; and to analyze how this contingency is compatible with the rise of pluralism and depersonalization in emerging political, literary, and cultural theory.

³⁴ This is in contrast to the prevailing multicultural ideology that eschews context, relationality, and change in favor of the "separate but equal" treatment (in reality a reification) of ethnoracial group identities. This reductive, essentialist, and proscriptive means of forging collective solidarity, what I call "identity politics," fosters the suppression of intragroup difference and an insular, enervating politics based around the reproduction and proliferation of identity, not the understanding of it in relation to a shifting sociopolitical milieu.

I: Historicity, Historicism, and What Hurts Most

Of course, to posit that the reification of identity and difference lay at the root of minority disenfranchisement is also to fly in the face of the last three decades of literary criticism and ideology critique. Such work, echoed frequently by ethnic and cultural studies, has taken it as axiomatic that history, and in particular the misuse of history identified as historicism,³⁵ is what hurts contemporary society the most. More recently, for instance, critic Jesse Cohn avers that the mind-body problem persists in *Apex* because a more complex, historical problem is revealed once the bandage of multiculturalism has been stripped away. Cohn argues that history *itself* is what ails Whitehead's protagonist, or in particular his complicity in the historical amnesia of multicultural capitalism. The fact that the protagonist continues to suffer even at the close of the narrative—when his choice of the town's new sobriquet has placed the *coup de grâce* on his corporate career—is due to *Apex's* uneasy balance between the perils of ignoring the past and the hazards of embracing it. From this vantage, multiculturalism is predicated on an ambivalence towards the past, which traps the protagonist between two unsavory alternatives. In the first, the consultant can suffer the slings and arrows of multicultural capitalism to fragment and undermine his community, all the while profiting off of the anamnestic power of capitalism's cultural production, dissemination, and consumption to hone his individual ability to craft cultural trends and tastes. In the second option he can arm himself against these forces, eschewing individual pastiche and power in favor of an “ineffable aura of authenticity and realness” vested within “a painful history of dues paid” (Cohn 20) to bolster the frayed edges of minority communal coherence and identity. History pains because it is either ignored to engender a false sense of individual agency (at the expense of the collective) or embraced too tightly as a means of

³⁵ For Frederic Jameson, the waning of genuine historicity and diachronic thinking is due to the rise of historicism's stylistic and simulacral uses of the past, trending towards nostalgic and reified reproductions of it (*Postmodernism* 18).

fostering political cohesion (at the expense of everything else.) In other words, the choice between the pain of historical amnesia and the alternative—an active embrace and re-experiencing of a painful past—is not much of one.

Other critics have attempted to argue the reverse, that historical uncertainty is the cause, and not the effect, of a flawed multiculturalism. Daniel Grausam, for instance, claims that the characterization of the past as irresolvable in Whitehead's fiction is deeply problematic.³⁶ As each of Whitehead's urbane and disaffected protagonists delve further into the record of Reconstruction Era events, the more murky the facts become. The consultant in *Apex*, for instance, lumbers through accounts both official and apocryphal as he tries to understand how the town's African American founding fathers, Abraham Goode and William Field, lost their political majority over a third man on the city council, the white industrialist Sterling Winthrop, to adopt his name as the town's own. Yet the details (who betrayed whom, and for what price?) escape his scrutiny: "he'd been trying to get into the heads of those two men, but ... [t]hey lived in a completely different context" (206). In *Days*, the journalist J. Sutter likewise tries to reconcile how twentieth-century progress and prosperity were predicated upon minority disenfranchisement as he is covering the John Henry Days festival in the town of Talcott, West Virginia. He soon discovers that although he "already knows the ending" to the legend, "there is more" to the man and his tale than even the most dedicated historians can possibly tell (389).

On Grausam's account, historicity begets more interconnectedness and diversity through spurring a "historical responsibility and ethical humanism" in the subject, allowing him or her to serve as a bridge or a "relay between 'official history' and all that has been left out" (638). Once the possibility of knowing, exhuming, or recuperating minority histories discarded by Anglo-

³⁶ Daniel Grausam, "After the Post(al)," p 637. Although he makes this claim of Whitehead's much larger second novel *John Henry Days* (2001), Grausam's observation is equally applicable to *Apex*, which is also interested in the irresolvable facts of the past. *Days* interweaves the details of a modern-day press event honoring the renowned railroad man John Henry with dubious retellings and redeployments of his life and legend from the 1890s up to the present day.

centric culture has been banished by postmodern technologies and fragmentation, the social order becomes irreparably fractured. By identifying multicultural pluralism as predicated upon historicity, Grausam finds Whitehead's emphasis on an indeterminate historiography to signal the advent of a new period in which collective identity and social diversity rest upon uncertain and melting foundations.³⁷ The extant criticism, therefore, avers that the potential for an authentically multicultural or plural society is an island rapidly sinking below the horizon of possibility.

Yet the critique of multicultural pluralism within Whitehead's novels is much finer than this. Citing a dolorous history (either lost, ignored, or cherished) as what sickens the multicultural doyens of *Apex* and *Days* grows less tenable if we consider the struggle with questions regarding the shape and substance of identity itself that are intertwined with the historical sensibilities of each text. In *Apex*, history cannot be the source of the "hex" or "badness" paining the protagonist if we consider the narrative treatment of William Field. Like the consultant, Field is also used to suggest a homology between corporeal and social injury within the text—but it is neither the repression nor the retrieval of his enslaved past that ails him. The protagonist notes that Field would "never make it as a modern day nomenclature consultant" because his

area of expertise wasn't human nature, but the human condition. He understood the rules of the game, had learned them through the barb on the whip, and was not afraid to name them. Let lesser men try to tame the world by giving it a name that might cover the wound, or camouflage it. Hide the badness from view. The prophet's work was of a different sort. (210)

³⁷ Though problematic for several reasons, I find Grausam's reliance on the loss of pluralism, which "made definitive history possible" (639), as the signpost of late postmodern literature to be dubious for several reasons. Pluralism, for Grausam, is circuitously defined as "an ethical project of re-understanding America as fundamentally pluralist rather than hopelessly fractured", and is characterized by the "possibility of a system of communication larger than those which connect individuals, a relay between textbook history and that which has been lost to history, a project very much like the work of [Whitehead's debut novel] *The Intuitionist*" (639). I am more sympathetic to accounts of contemporary literature that pay closer attention to how history is used in the composition of group identities—whether the resulting identities are fixed or fluid, instrumental or adaptive—accounts that focus on complex acts of collectivization rather than the mere fact of multicultural pluralism or diversity. My account, which considers the quality of connections forged across intra- and interethnic differences, takes pluralism to be the starting point of an analysis of contemporary ethnic American literature, rather than its conclusion.

Here the scars and physical remainders of Field's subjugated past are implied to have taught his recognition of the "badness" or the broader social wounds left behind by chattel slavery. More important, however, is that the progression from somatic to social scars in this passage exists to distinguish between ineffectual and useful means of identifying and responding to social ills. Yet what does this emphasis on the act of recognition, as opposed to the fact of recognition, mean for the role history plays in these two texts?

I take the above passage to suggest that remembering or erasing the past isn't enough to combat these social ills, instead, *how* one remembers, reconstructs, or uses this history becomes key. For instance, both the consultant and Field register socio-historical wounds through physical injuries, and both turn to acts of naming or identification in an attempt to ameliorate such injuries. Yet not all names are created equal, as *Apex* repeatedly advises us, and the distinction drawn in the above passage, between human nature and the human condition, is paramount for understanding why. Field is not concerned with true and immutable essences, or haunted (as the consultant is) by the difference between the right name for a product and the true names that supposedly lie beneath. He is not as concerned with naming the thing itself, that is, as he is with identifying "the rules of the game" or the contexts and conditions that shaped a particular person, place, or phenomenon. This emphasis on the distinction between matters of human nature, essence, and identity to the more mercurial conditions that shape those acts of identification and signification is crucial for *Apex*. The pathological body becomes a means of recognizing and rectifying the ongoing conditions that enable past and present social wrongs, rather than evoking a definitive identity, marking, or name that will dress, but not *redress*, such wounds.

The wounded corporeal body emerges as a catalyst for turning from self-evident surfaces to the messier contingency, and connections, that lie beneath in *Days* as well. Similar to Field, John Henry in *Days* can also be seen to encapsulate this distinction between identifying conditions over essences. This is figuratively represented as the rail driver is pitted against not

human nature but nature itself: the mountain that he labors to dig the C&O railroad tunnel through. Frequently, he is portrayed as attacking the core of the mountain, and dreams of striking its very heart with his drill bit, only to find himself awash in its blood, trapped within “tracings of sinew...veins and arteries”, and boiling in its “angry guts” as the mountain reacts to the “violence against its self” (238). Significantly, this dream of wounded embodiment is nested in John Henry’s own corporeal malaise when it is revealed to be the by-product of a fever that has been wracking him for days. After he recovers, however, he is no longer concerned with tackling the mountain’s core self, identity, or essence, instead realizing both it and himself to be trapped within a complicated trifecta of instrumentalization and sacrifice in the name of technological progress. It is this feeling of kinship he tries to clarify in a letter to his fiancée, and the missal’s haunting phrasing sparks the creation of the fabled Ballad of John Henry, which is demonstrated as bridging racial, gendered, and class divides throughout the novel. The feverish body thus precipitates a critical shift within the Whitehead’s text. Rather than understanding identity as intractable nature or a fixed thing to be conquered and manipulated, John Henry comes to a more etymological understanding of it as *identitas*, or a condition of sameness. The “prophet’s work” is therefore to put identity into context, to understand it as a construct embedded within complex network comprised of changing conditions, phenomena, and agents.

In this light, the prevalence of mind-body problems in in Whitehead’s novels serves as a critique not of the historical amnesia of capitalism, but rather of how historicism facilitates an *identitarian* amnesia within neoliberal multiculturalism. That is, the wounded bodies in these novels evince not the pain of their forgotten or remembered past, but rather the pathology of an identity taken out of historical context. Thus the privileged place that history—unofficial, lost, or otherwise—enjoys in securing true social diversity in literary critical accounts like Cohn’s and Grausam’s deserves more consideration. The slippery logic connecting a shared or recovered history to issues of origin, authenticity, and collective identity has emerged as the primary

concern of recent criticism in ethnic literary studies. Kenneth Warren's work, for instance, carefully analyzes a perplexing trend in African American literary production from the 1980s to the present, where progressive political and aesthetic production of this period has curiously limited itself to stating the obvious, that racism still explains ongoing minority disenfranchisement, discrimination, and inequality. This rather inert conclusion is drawn because—despite the evolution of *de jure* discrimination into more subtle *de facto* forms—racism is seen as the echo or by-product of these past practices of legal segregation, not as a form of discrimination that has evolved out of and beyond Jim Crow. Racism has thus “become a problem of history, [or] the problem of how we know history” (Warren 85). Particularly troubling for Warren is how this conceptualization of racism as a purely historical problem has influenced minority politics in the few decades, and has led to the rise of a cultural dominant both he and Walter Michaels identify as “historicism.” Historicism, loosely defined, is the construction of group identity around a shared set of past experiences, and involves the selective use of past (and not present) hardships to define collective identity.³⁸ For critics like Warren and Michaels, the articulation of historicism and collective identity is deeply troublesome because it replaces direct action politics with an inefficacious cultural or identity politics.³⁹

This identity politics is far from the democratic ideal because it was originally formed in response to the anti-democratic forces of legalized segregation. Warren and political theorist

³⁸ Historicism arose after the demise of legalized segregation, as Warren demonstrates, because once “it no longer became necessary for black writers to consider contesting Jim Crow as the point of their effort they were freed to become exclusively involved with the problem of identity” (107). The notion of historicism developed by Michaels and adopted by Warren, which is exemplified by the concept of ‘rememory’ in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) (“a picture floating around out there outside my head”), owes much to the distinction between historicity and historicism Jameson developed in his early work. Michaels and Warren’s profitable expansion on this phenomenon, which I will designate as “identitarian historicism” hereafter, cannily links Jameson’s historicism and the postmodern production of difference to the postnationalist production of cultural differences in group identity formations under a multiculturalism.

³⁹ Culture fares rather poorly in both critical accounts, but as I have explained elsewhere, it is when identity is taken out of context and naturalized that these injurious representational strategies develop, and culture per se is not to be blamed. Thus my preference for the term “identity politics” to describe the instrumental uses of identity after Civil Rights and Self-Determination, and to reserve Warren’s “cultural politics” for the era in which there were no democratic alternatives available to African Americans.

Adolph Reed explain that under Jim Crow a “race-group interest politics” constructed a coherent, corporate black cultural identity to combat the racist assumptions of the majority that upheld de jure racial segregation (Warren 109). One of the side effects of this politics, however, is the reification of minority cultural identity under these circumstances. In other words, minority identity politics make a slight shift in response to the end of Jim Crow. Now, Warren and Michaels argue, identity is based upon the past experience of such legal oppression: “the past (what happened) becomes *our* past (what happened to us)” (Warren, *What Was* 97). The difficulty with identitarian historicism is thus not only that the identities it creates are insular, inborn, and unresponsive to shifting milieus, but they are also politically ineffective when it comes to redressing the more subtle and systemic social ills.⁴⁰ If historicism is the mechanism that forges intragroup cohesion under identity politics, Warren clearly identifies it as a symptom of the anti-democratic forces operating in American society, not their cure.

II. Consensual Disease, or an Unhealthy Identity Politics

It is pertinent to note that Warren’s study, like several other prominent literary, political, and cultural works of theory and criticism, has found it difficult to resist reiterating the pathological rhetoric that was attributed to collective identity politics in Jameson’s early work. While such critical accounts seem to find the language of pathology an apt one to describe the subtle mechanisms of historicism that reify and disseminate forms of belonging under identity politics, they have as of yet reached no consensus regarding how to check the steady slide of politics into sickly ontology. Warren and Michaels have asserted that cognitively mapping our

⁴⁰ Rigidly constructed to achieve a certain task, identity is stripped of its historical context and made to seem a natural or inherent property of a group or collective. Like a fixed wrench sized to fit a bolt that isn’t manufactured anymore, the careful crafting and dissemination of cultural identity as a means of effecting political change is a tactic that has persisted long after the end of legal segregation and other overt means of minority disenfranchisement. Despite this shift from de jure to de facto oppression following the Civil Rights movement, the production of the now anachronistic wrench continues, and becomes an end in and of itself.

present situation and reviving class-consciousness and solidarity will abolish identity politics and resurrect paradigms of direct political action.⁴¹ Yet other anti-essentialist work that preceded them argues that jettisoning identity in favor of ideology is still to remain trapped in a binary logic of difference. Stuart Hall deflates the romanticization of democratic dissent by warning that ideological and class affiliations can be essentialized just as easily as cultural identities, as is evidenced in the “cultural and racist nationalisms [that formed] in response to the pluralisation of social struggle” in the postmodern period. Here the argument is that it is the terrain on which identity rests, the logic of difference itself, needs to be revisited. Instead of espousing binarized forms of difference like identity and ideology, or culture and politics, collective identification ought to be conceived as shedding rigid conceptions of difference to adopt more labile, contingent ones. In contrast to alarmist accounts like Grausam’s then, a shifting and unstable foundation for identity and affiliation may be the only viable one in the new millennium. Any politics committed to a fixed identity or political ideology is problematic, according to Hall—the solution to such identitarianism lies in giving up the commitment to stable and immutable ontological positions altogether, so that “the future belongs to the impure” (“Subjects” 299).

Political theory has arrived at this call for impurity and heterogeneity after wrestling with the same problem Hall does. Like the anti-identitarian critics drawn from Ethnic and Cultural studies above, Adolph Reed, Wendy Brown, and Chantal Mouffe have trenchantly argued that instead of opposing cultural investments with Marxist ones, we ought instead to read identity as metastable, provisional, and pliable. Like Reed and Brown, Mouffe finds that dominant discourses coupling universal tolerance to a politics of recognition often conceal a reifying tendency. What such paradigms effect, according to Mouffe, is a separate-but-equal relativism

⁴¹ Of course, Jameson’s definition of cognitive mapping is notoriously difficult to pin down. I’m working off the definition he gave in *Postmodernism*, that “cognitive mapping is a code word for class consciousness” (418), but elsewhere the concept is also used to connote a restored sense of historicity as well. For a fuller treatment of the subject, I’d suggest Robert Tally Jr.’s account of Jameson’s cognitive mapping, esp. p 67-78.

that purposefully mistakes recognition of various identities for the redistribution of power betwixt different social groups. A more effective way to redistribute power, Mouffe argues, is pluralism. Like multiculturalism, pluralism legitimates multiplicity and division, but unlike its rival pluralism predicates diversity on the presence of healthy debate, conflict, and contingency. Pluralism therefore attends to the way in which differences are constructed, so that no one difference may be naturalized or used as a rationale to reorder of the social in oppressive or violent ways.

Pluralism is a useful antithesis to the identitarianism concealed within multiculturalism because it views identity as contingent and relationally formed. This relationality is paradoxical, yet not dialectical in the classic sense: separate entities are not contradictory but are irreducible to each other. Mouffe notes that this sort of relation

should not be conceived as one existing between two principles entirely external to each other and establishing between themselves a simple relations of negotiation [but] envisaged instead as creating a relation not of *negotiation* but of *contamination*, in the sense that once the articulation of the two principles has been effectuated—even in a precarious way—each of them changes the identity of the other. (10)

Here, it is clearly the type of relationship between two entities, their context and not their content, that matters most. This is the core principle of anti-essentialist discourses—whether they be political or literary theory, Cultural or Ethnic studies—an emphasis on a multi-directional, reciprocal, contingent, and coeval relationship between various identities, entities, or groups.

I argue that the mind-body problems prevalent in Whitehead's work can be read as thoughtfully expanding upon the metaphorical instances of impurity, contingency, and contamination in the anti-essentialist theories sketched above. As a literary device, the pathological body can, as the political theorists above suggest, model contingency by serving as a mediating term between duration and flux, self and alien, agent and vector, privileging continual uncertainty and negotiation within and between group identities. In addition to this, however, the

pathological body can also parody the mechanisms of essentialism, as is suggested in the literary critical uses of the trope. With regard to the latter, identity politics function much the same as a viral or bacterial pathogen that induces its host to reproduce and disseminate its genetic code. Like such pathogens, the survival of multicultural ideology is predicated on the reproduction of a paradigm of cultural identity that is reified and homogeneous—often at the expense of its host. The infected or pathological body metaphorically evokes that of an individual conceived as the bearer of an impossible burden, or the fiction of an essential and immutable group identity and collective will that defines him or her—rather than the reverse. The mind-body problem, in other words, can alert the protagonists of these novels to the fine distinction between two different forms of naming and belonging: those that pay careful attention to the act of identification itself, mapping shifting conditions and contexts to craft more productive, pluralist depictions of collective identity; and an inefficacious, parasitic identity politics that trades in essences.

The infected, feverish, or wounded body therefore plays a key role in attuning the protagonist to the absence of democratic pluralism entailed by the forced consensus of an unhealthy identity politics. To better demonstrate this, I'd like to unpack a scene from *Days* that depicts J. at a typical press junket in New York City, some months prior to the John Henry Days festival. The narrative takes a moment to run through the “complimentary pairs” circulating about the room, finding no two alike. Some groupings foreground those at opposite ends of the same process “recovering nicely thank you and the unknowingly metastatic discussing a summer share” or competitively at odds, such as the “shortlisted for the position and the recently eliminated shook hands, unaware of their fates” (323). Elsewhere the narrator highlights gender or class disparities like those between “lipstick lesbians and the baldheaded butches [who] traded stock tips” or the chairman of the board and the proverbial kid from the mailroom (323). The scene, in short, appears to be one of truly pluralist difference, with no two sets of attendees alike.

In the midst of this incredible variety, J. is brooding over the death of former Black Panther Toure Nkumreh, a man who taught a class J. took as a CUNY undergraduate. Scenes from the junket are juxtaposed with J.'s memories of the class, and at first the two threads are kept largely separate: ironic detachment predominates at the junket in stark contrast to J.'s sophomoric idealism at the prospect of revolutionary politics. As the passage progresses, however, the jaded tone of the junket infiltrates that of the lecture segments: the formerly exciting anecdotes from Nkumreh's Panther days (when he does show up to lecture) are dully recycled, and after a half-hearted sit-in the large class dwindles. Earnest note taking devolves into "Black Power doodles," and the communally shared "ease of the righteous" generated during the sit-in sours into acrobatic acts of avoidance between J. and the former classmates he encounters later in life. Once J.'s recollections are thoroughly reintegrated both tonally and temporally with the junket, a peculiar set of corporeal metaphors emerges to describe the unfolding scene. In the following scene, the narrator suggests that despite the apparent diversity, all of the partygoers came for the same reason:

They came because it kept the hate away, but most of all they checked out their chipped bodies in mirrors, inspected the bits that had fallen away and came here because they thought tonight might be the night of the transfiguration, that sidereal maneuverings up above might allow that thing in the center of the universe to see them for the first time and it might love them, unclip the bowing velvet rope and accept them into itself. But it wasn't going to happen. A social disease would induct novitiates by dawn. (333)

Perceiving some sort of physical lack in themselves, the junket's attendees seek out an acceptance and recognition from above, even though such existential confirmation will not be forthcoming. To replace their bodily finitude, that is, they seek out some form of acceptance or belonging, but instead of induction into an idealized universal center they are beset from below by another, diseased form of sociality, which by the chapter's final line "will have transformed them all forever" (337). Neither the belonging sought after nor the belonging achieved here can be pluralist: the first depends upon the recognition of a discrete center existing outside human

action, debate, and interpretation; and the second relies upon an equally vague external force that completely commandeers its victim vectors. The communality this creates is an identitarian one, in other words, because it emphasizes the action of immutable forces on receptive vessels, rather than depicting the cross-contamination between cultural producers and consumers and emphasizing the constructed nature of the ideals and identities we live by. The erosion of democratic pluralism, the loss of agency, and instrumentality go hand-in-hand with reified forms of belonging. Thus the social “disease” that creates consensus and communality is the metaphorical manifestation of a coercive form of identity politics.

Apex’s primal scene⁴², when the consultant discovers how the original consensus determining the town’s identity was unconscionably forged, even more explicitly links pathology to identity politics. It begins with a question of legacy, when the consultant discovers two discrepancies in the town’s history, linked to two separate acts of naming. First, the consultant notices that Goode and Field, who were equal partners in the founding of Winthrop, are oddly not given equal representation on the signage around town. Second, the various historical accounts of how Winthrop came by its name are inconsistent and contradictory. At first the consultant is given to understand that the original vote on Winthrop’s town name had unanimous support from the town council, which was comprised of Goode, Field, and the white industrialist Sterling Winthrop. Yet when he reads the larger, unredacted version of the town’s history, he learns that on the day of the vote “Field had taken to fever and was not present, but the motion was passed unanimously and the town was changed forever. Winthrop was born” (197). Seeking an explanation on the discrepancy between the first two accounts from the town’s mayor, Regina Goode, only provides the reader with another version of the story.

⁴² This scene unfolds in a little under ten pages in the novel. It flows from the discovery of Field’s fever and the vote’s fictive consensus (196-7) through the hospital flashback (198-203) before returning to the present to disclose Regina’s account of the vote as precipitating Field’s demise (203-6).

Regina tells the protagonist that Field *was* there on the day of the fateful vote, and had fallen ill and died shortly afterwards. After, that is, her ancestor Abraham Goode sided against Field (and their agreed upon selection, Freedom) and with Winthrop to vote for the appellation of the latter as that of the town. Field's fever emerges here to align his physical death with his political disenfranchisement, which Regina argues was warranted as a necessary sacrifice for the greater good. Because allying with Winthrop afforded the black community more practical gains like jobs and commercial trade, Goode's duplicity is justified as "the most prudent thing for the community they were building" (205). Here the tyranny of the majority and Field's political marginalization are recast as compromising his corporal integrity, precipitating his infection and premature death. While the text does not condemn the more positive effects of decisions like Goode's to trade economic gain and relative stability for social parity, it does view such gains as only ever partial in comparison to the ongoing evolution of racism and discrimination and the continuation of minority disenfranchisement.

The novel's critique of Goode's decision is sharpened when it shifts to consider another form of identitarian compensation that arises in the wake of Field's social and somatic demise. Regina defends Goode's actions by arguing that at the time, Goode "didn't get anything concrete" in return for his vote (206), and that he was acting solely for the wellbeing of the community. Remembering the predominance of Goode family names he'd seen on signage when Regina first showed him around town, the consultant quips, "at the very least Goode got a few street signs out of it" (205). On that earlier occasion, Regina explained that

Everybody in my family is named after someone who came before. And if we didn't know them personally, we knew them as a place we traveled on ... That's how you know what part of town you're in. Over here, the streets are people. They're your history, your family. Richards, Nathaniel, Goode. How you know you're home is when you see your name on the street. And if you get lost, just look for yourself.⁴³

⁴³ P 127-8. Although Regina mentions two other prominent black family names here—Richards and Nathaniel—they occur nowhere else in the text. Instead, given Goode family names predominate. Regina tenders this interpretation to the protagonist while parked at the intersection of Regina and Reginald streets, for instance. These and the other signifiers

These passages can be taken together to suggest that a certain form of naming—or rather, a shift from one sort of identification to another—comes to compensate the black community in Winthrop for their political disenfranchisement. The name the community had previously chosen for itself (after much debate between Goode and Field), Freedom, is here substituted for a series of Goode family names that have been recycled on both places and persons for more than a century. Goode’s original betrayal seems to have facilitated the shift from a naming associated with the democratic process of dissent and debate to an identity politics that reproduces itself along immutable lines of descent.

As identity politics takes over as a means of spatially and politically structuring the African American community within Winthrop, historicity slides into historicism and infection abounds. Consider how laboriously the consultant uncovered the saga of that fateful vote: the official history of Winthrop provided to him made no mention of Field’s dissent, and had declared the vote unanimous; the second unedited account also retained the fiction of unanimous consensus, but at least mentioned Field’s illness and absence at the time of the vote. Yet it was only the third and final account supplied by Regina that disclosed Field’s dissent preceding the vote and his illness proceeding from it. Here the narrative account of Field’s fever precedes the story of Goode’s betrayal, and just as smoke signals fire, corporeal illness is used to foreshadow the disenfranchisement of identity politics. Interestingly, the consultant’s own infection narrative—a flashback to his treatment in the hospital following his collapse at the Identity Awards—emerges between the second and third accounts of Field’s vote to emphasize the correlation between corporeal infection and social ills. For instance, the consultant had originally thought that the stubbed toe, described as an “invisible wound” beneath the Apex bandage, had merely “developed an abuse pathology, and kept returning to the hurt as if one day it would place

associated with Regina seem to suggest rule by oligarchical descent rather than democratic consent in Winthrop.

the pain in context, explain it. Name it” (139). This suggests that with proper regard for historicity (diachronic analysis and contextualization) over historicism, any wound—be it corporeal, psychosomatic, or social—can mend. After all, his doctor assured him that if this urge to return and revisit past abuses, or the toe’s propensity towards stubbing itself on “loathsome low perpendiculars” were his only problem, the foot “would have healed in time” (199).

Yet the desire to name and contextualize the abuses of the past becomes pathological when it is usurped by the identification with those past abuses, much as I outlined in the earlier discussion of historicism. That is, the toe’s relatively benign need to return becomes harmful when the pain it engenders is ignored, “accepted as his lot ... and gotten used to after a while” (200). Instead of addressing the pain of the past, the narrator merely dresses it beneath Apex, the conveniently multihued bandage that makes the flesh appear whole and unmarked, as if there were no wound to mend. The apex bandage thus stands for an identity politics that substitutes process for product—it replaces a historical and contingent understanding of past challenges and injuries with a flesh-toned fix. Historical context deteriorates into identitarian content, just as the toe’s wound gives way to infection and advanced necrosis. This passage also goes farther to link identity politics and essentialism by troubling characterizations of difference as innate or natural through confronting, as John Henry did, nature itself. Significantly, the consultant finds that the fever and subsequent amputation of his toe, the entire string of circumstances leading up to his contract work in Winthrop, can be traced back to a noxious marsh he had inadvertently submerged his foot in at a corporate retreat, which “[s]erved him right for trying to get a little nature” (200). Nature can be read here not only as the bucolic surrounds afforded to the consultant and his peers at their rustic retreat center, but also more widely as a potential antidote to the pain of the consultant’s invisible wound, the pain associated with historicism and identity politics. The consultant realizes that “[n]ature is a strong brand name” (153) because it offers such a powerful fiction: a tale of unsullied purity, a healing wholeness that idealizes pre-modern

origins as a means to cure postmodern woes. (Or toes?) He ultimately contradicts this, however, realizing that nature “is no more pure” than the midtown world he had left behind (153). It is, in other words, just as vulnerable to commodification as anything else, suggesting that absolutes like authenticity and purity are unattainable. The consultant’s flashback thus implies that to turn toward naturalized, fixed, or inherent values as a solution to the mind-body problem is to go from bad to worse. If the ills of historicist identity politics register through (psycho)somatic wounds like the perpetually stubbed toe, then the attempt to cure the same by way of nature only exacerbates these injuries, and results in the contraction of a more serious infection, which transforms the consultant in a way that is as undemocratic as the purity he originally sought.

The primal scene I’ve been analyzing here implies that the finely wrought relationship between naming and identity, historicism, and pathology is crafted so that corporeal disease and infection indicate disqualifying and undemocratic mechanisms inherent within the broader social body—and that it is a dynamic that is not easily altered.

III. Thickened Temporalities and Socialities

In sketching the shape of the anti-essentialist solution to the complicated imbrication of historicism, essentialism, and reification I’ve dwelt within the negative as much as the next critic. The answer does not lay with a direct action politics, as Warren and Michaels would have, nor does it lay with an uncritical embrace of an impure or infectious politics, as Hall or Mouffe might suggest. Both of these alternatives can produce collective identities that conscript the individual and render her the passive carrier of a larger, immutable and inscrutable force, ideology, or identity. Each alternative can potentially create a kind of duality—between agent and instrument; disease and vector; essence and ephemerality; past and present—that privileges the former term over the latter, and locks the pair in a fixed binary relationship where each remains essentially the same. Yet the same pathological body that parodies the unhealthy political implications of the

joining of historicism and essentialism within multiculturalism can also, as I argued earlier, positively model more contingent forms of belonging.

Affect theorist Lauren Berlant's work on bodily ambivalence may be of some use here. In her most recent book, *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant describes the sustaining yet unworkable fantasies of the future that dominate contemporary life. These fantasies, she argues, are the dim vestiges of non-market collectivities being choked out by capitalism's insistence on an overwhelmingly productive present. Her treatise provocatively connects these fantasies of the future to historicism and reification and argues that this dynamic is reflected primarily on the affective, visceral level of the body, depicting "not the continuities of institutionalized history but" a collective sense of things, or "something incoherent or uncongealed in the ongoing activity of the social" (198). The bodily can either obfuscate or illuminate the ongoing shifts in the political and economic forces shaping society. Corporeal ambivalence is optimistic and cruel, for instance, when it is used to reinforce the subject's alienation and isolation. Here the subject attempts to reproduce itself in relation to common social norms despite their disintegrating infrastructural supports. Conversely, bodily ambivalence can also be useful when it inspires someone to learn from the precarity of neoliberalism and the dissolution of common forms of belonging, reciprocity, and intimacy. Good ambivalence will commonly spur research "to find out something not in the idiom of pasts and futures ...but about the present's ongoing condition" to create a less systemically violent world, an "unfolding, and imagining a historici[ty] from within a discontinuous present and ways of being that were never sovereign" (92-3). Repeatedly, Berlant hints that the non-linear time of affective fantasies can be used to "distort the present on behalf of what the present can become" (263). Fighting fire with fire, so to speak, such fantasies can alert readers to the material (and often painful) effects of the neoliberal distortion of the present moment, which urge the reproduction of antiquated paradigms of belonging and identity that no longer serve any practical need.

Intriguingly, tropes of nonlinear time are central to generating these more adaptive forms of communality in Whitehead's novels. The conclusion of *Days*, for instance, flexes on the moment in which J. Sutter is either about to be cured of the culture work that sickens him, or be killed by it.⁴⁴ If the novel begins with a sickly J. traveling from one airport or "terminal city" to the next, it culminates with the interminable moment of his decision whether or not to leave the press junket, which readers know will result in an act of domestic terrorism that will claim the lives of several journalists. J. must decide in this moment whether or not to forego the record for consecutively attended press conferences to catch a plane and get the rest of "the real story" of the John Henry legend from Pamela Street, repeatedly assuring the reader that "[t]here is still time" for him to decide (387-8).

The complexly interwoven, stalled, and stilled time represented in the moment of his decision is juxtaposed against the "unbroken line of events" J. had been cultivating (388). That is to say, the event-driven and linear timeline of the journalist junketeers is here set in sharp contrast to the alternative description of time and communality represented by Pamela's collection of John Henry memorabilia. Tracing the evolution of the John Henry ballad through the years and various forms of media, the collection Pamela inherited from her father celebrates the process of cultural transformation and adaptation as a more viable (if only ever provisional) means of forging collective identity across racial, gender, and class hierarchies. That the precarity of J.'s body—suspended between health and death, contingency and commodification—is heightened in this interminable moment strongly suggests that maintaining this ambivalence, rather than resolving it and moving on, is the privileged task the novel sets for itself. The text

⁴⁴ J.'s body, like the consultant's, is sickened by his work: the steady diet of questionable food and the free booze he consumes at press junkets, the insubstantial pop culture he both ingests and produces, frequently leaves him by turns voracious and nauseated. This is manifest, spectacularly, when he accidentally chokes on a bit of free prime rib he is wolfing down at the opening event of the John Henry Days festival, which results in a sore throat that persists throughout the junket. Like the consultant's near-death experience in *Apex*, this incident suggests that identitarian essentialism and historicism can prove a deadly combination. "Seduced by the red illumination" of the prime rib heat lamp, J. envisions "the sublime distillation of all the buffets he's known" awaits, and he eats so quickly that he only slowly realizes that the supposedly nourishing "blood" and "essence of the beef" are choking him (60).

implies that neither the past nor the future, the foregone facts of J.'s or John Henry's demise, are important. Rather it is the act of retelling and reconfiguring the legend, of using it as a tool to inhabit and examine the complicated connections within the present moment, that emerges as paramount for creating a more durable and useful sort of community.

Apex's thickening of the temporal, of using the past to reexamine the present and eschew the future, also centers around an inexplicably ailing body. This is seen when the consultant embarrassingly falls from a table in the midst of a social mixer orchestrated by Lucky Aberdeen, a Winthrop native and software billionaire eager to promote his suggestion for the town's name: New Prospera. Aberdeen's proposal is the clear frontrunner amongst the other names suggested as replacements for Winthrop, because it

strutted on the quicksilver feet of futurity. It was progress, and progress was Windex, Vaseline, Band-Aids: pure brand superiority. Beyond advertising. Why advertise when the name of your product was tattooed on hearts and brains, had always been there, a part of us, under the skin. (175)

Here futurity appears to be comprised of an intricate intersection of historicism, consumerism, and identity, all of which converge upon a corporeal and essentialist metaphor, or the tattoo that is at once brand and psychic birthmark. Names like New Prospera, the consultant muses, are not all that different from the hip-hop song "Peep This" that inexplicably galvanizes the crowd surrounding him at the party. The song has "invaded the culture with such holy fervor that it revealed itself to be a passkey to universal psyche, perfectly naming some national characteristic or diagnosing some common spiritual ailment" (176). Like New Prospera, then, the song's charm derives from its identificatory power, enabling it to emerge as the touchstone for the universal, the national, and the common, and to unite listeners from across all socioeconomic backgrounds. Yet also like New Prospera, "Peep This" is reckoned to possess an "uncanny power" that is inscribed corporeally (176). The song, for instance, is seen to have "attached itself to [the consultant's] nervous system. He was more or less powerless against it, a blinking

automaton” as he convulsively begins to dance to the “sublime and imperative....directives of the bass line” (176). It would appear impossible to separate the song’s essentialist aspects from this more infectious and viral capacity, which dubiously unites the crowd under a sort of bacchanalian conscription that is more affective than effective or pluralist. Under the influence of this ahistorical essentialism, the consultant reasons that “[t]he point of a name [must be] to set up a vibration in the bones that resembled home” (177).

Yet if this model relegates identity to the task of merely echoing an immaterial essence or home felt—rather than known—deep within the body, the novel soon upends it. Notably, the consultant’s injury intervenes to disabuse him of this notion that he can return (or bestow a sense of) home when his artful foot slips out from under him as he is on the verge of pronouncing his decision to name the town New Prospera. After limping back to his room in Hotel Winthrop he discovers, to his chagrin, that the housekeeper has at last had her way and undone the homey chaos the consultant had been carefully cultivating all week behind his ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign. Freshly disinterred from his “blissful forgetfulness [of the past] few days” by the slight, he wonders:

How had he ended up in this place? Not this particular room, but *place*? ... Sure, he could point to his hospitalization as a clear marker of Before and After, but he recognized such distinctions as counterfeit. This place was the sum of old choices, the heap of his years. (190, emphasis original)

Questioning the sharp demarcation and severability of Before from After by placing the ailing ethnic body in the break, Whitehead’s consultant turns from dubious epochal distinctions to a more diachronic and messy sense of history and self. Unable to sleep and “returned to the day of his arrival” by virtue of his new room and “his most famous injury,” he redoubles his research efforts “and hits the books” (191) to pick up both the official and manuscript versions of the town’s history.

As he does so he immediately “stub[s] his toe” on the historian’s repeated use of the anachronism “colored” (190-1), a figurative injury that prompts him to more carefully consider the gravity of his task, the assignment of a name which will embed his clientele in what he calls “the great procession...[where] things never remain still for long” (192). Yet insulting as the epithet is, he reflects that to be without a brand or a name—Winthrop’s current predicament—is to also be without any sense of historicity. The consultant has a vision, for instance, of the townspeople hounding him as zombies, “normal-looking, yet in complete exile from themselves and their histories” and figuratively hungering to know the new name he has chosen (195). The scene cannily suggests that what is horrifying about the insatiable undead is also what is horrifying about the nomenclature work the consultant performs: both reduce complicated processes into material products; turning persons into bodies and identities into commodified brand names.⁴⁵ Like roving signifiers, the townspeople are undead habitués of the hyperreal, body altogether without mind, seeking only to produce more of the same. The only way to deliver them from such a fate, the consultant realizes, is to find a name that will give them back their buried history, which he soon uncovers, thanks to his felicitous injury. In this light, *Days* and *Apex* can be seen as troubling identitarian historicism and commodity-driven forms of belonging—not with a reified rendering of past experiences, nor the vacuous promise of a brighter tomorrow—but with scenes that depict the present as redefined by its constant interaction with and mediation of the past, alongside bodies that are also in flux.

By aligning this renewed sense of historicity with a contingent take on identity and corporeal ambivalence, *Days* and *Apex* subtly craft the “new ordinary politics” that Berlant calls for at the end of *Cruel Optimism*: which balance the need for collective identity, affiliation, and coherence (the political) with more pragmatic questions pertaining to changing needs and goals,

⁴⁵ Whitehead makes good use of this metaphor in his 2011 novel *Zone One*, which I will revisit in the conclusion.

resource redistribution, and risk (politics). Whitehead's novels expand upon Berlant's theory in that his dynamic communal paradigms emphasize not so much a tension between the constructs that weld communities together and the material needs that tear them apart, but rather the constitutive instability at the center of both our cultural constructs and the play of political, economic, and social forces. Once dynamic forms of identity are recognized as reflecting and interwoven with a set of economic and sociocultural forces that are likewise in motion, we are forced to acknowledge social division, conflict, and upheaval are inevitable and ineradicable.

To recognize that social division is an incontrovertible fact, but the identities that express it are constantly in flux, requires that we make room for dissent and foster spaces where it can be expressed productively. For Mouffe this encapsulates the "agonistic" approach to democratic pluralism, wherein disagreements are voiced "agonistically" by way of ideological debate and not "antagonistically" by way of entrenched ontological positions. This latter model results, I argue, in an essentialist identity politics, which places "too much emphasis on consensus and the refusal of confrontation" and "lead[s] to apathy and disaffection with political participation" (Mouffe 104). Conversely, an contingent and conflictual approach to democratic pluralism entails more, and not less conflict, debate, and disagreement across social divisions. Here different political positions can agree on the value of certain principles, but constantly haggle over interpretations of those principles and their application through social policy. By foregrounding the mechanics of the political process rather than its potential pain, this conflictual pluralism provides a more systemically aware model for conceptualizing collectivity. Understandably then, it is Whitehead (an author who is "constitutionally leery of systems"⁴⁶) who has engineered a vision of communality that eschews identity politics in order to become more systemically aware. Fully attuned to the complicated play of sociocultural, political, and economic forces shaping

⁴⁶ "New Eclecticism: An Interview with Colson Whitehead" p 396.

contemporary life, the communities rendered in Whitehead's texts are engrossed with the task of mapping the rules of the game—rather than the ontological hand-wringing that is typical of the multicultural model.

This agonistic approach to communality can be seen in *Days* as the group or “family” gathering around and through the Street collection of John Henry memorabilia. They are identified, for instance, as “strivers” (383) brought together by the power the John Henry legend possesses to connect many under one name, both within and across generations—forming a family bound not by shared genes or memory so much as they are by an object whose adaptability connects them across generational and racial lines. *Apex* emphasizes a similar effortfulness at the core of agonistic pluralism when the consultant decides to eschew Goode names in favor of the moniker originally suggested by its childless founding father, Field: Struggle. Whitehead's novels therefore depict models of postnationalist collectivity that are less temporally and biologically linear than they are forged continually through time itself, comprised not of the erasure of conflict but by a constant state of doubt, uncertainty, and negotiation. These strivers are not content to passively inhabit either side of the binary definition of difference, nor to transcend it. Instead they dwell in the muddy roots of the tree of difference itself, witnessing the translation of fat and fallow years into palimpsestic rings and a procession of new and ever changing identitarian fruits.

The mind-body problems at the center of Whitehead's work are literary devices that signify not historical amnesia, nor the slow death that a neoliberal future promises, but rather the absolute necessity of confronting our condition, not grasping after our nature. Such a contingent take on identity and politics is the “prophet's work” the consultant alludes to at the end of *Apex*, which is neither the recuperative project of (dis)covering the past nor that of foretelling the future. Rather, the prophet's task lay within untangling the skein of forces that helped to create this moment. As J. Sutter notes when finally confronting the mountain himself in *Days* “[t]he

daily battles that have lost meaning are clearly drawn again, the opponents and objectives named and understood. The true differences between you and them. And it” (322). True differences, that is, only ever forged in strife and struggle.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM AFRO- TO NATIVE AMERICAN FICTIONS

Another text notable for its wedding of a moribund humor to kaleidoscopic cultural improvisation is *Reservation Blues* (1995), the debut novel by Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene). Its plot revolves around a group of young Spokane and Flathead Indians who pursue an artistic career to escape their impoverished reservations. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor Joseph, Junior Polatkin and the sisters Chess and Checkers Warm Water form a rock band named Coyote Springs, a dynamic ensemble whose sound shifts effortlessly between blues, rock, pop, gospel, and traditional forms to the delight of native, white, and black listeners alike. The band grows in popularity and fame, eventually winning a chance to audition for a major record label in New York City. When the members of Coyote Springs physically cannot bring themselves to play for the studio executives, however, the band fails to win a recording contract and returns home, where they give up music for good. The silver lining in their failure, however, appears when the reservation community that was fractured by the band's rapid rise seems to be united and revitalized by their return.

In spite of the differences between the two—that *Blues* details the dramatic failure of the artistic demagogues at its center, where *Shuffle* focuses on one's success—both works deploy an affinity for the macabre when they interweave pop culture and long histories of racial oppression to craft a sharp critique of multiculturalism. In each novel the meteoric rise of an artist or artists is powered by an omnivorous combination of traditional and syncretic forms of cultural expression, an aesthetic project that becomes increasingly ambivalent as these creative pioneers are beset by representational demands from both within as well as outside of the minority

community. Put slightly differently, both texts turn to charismatic artists struggling with questions of aesthetic production to articulate anxieties about commodification, cultural (mis)representation, and communal belonging.

In *Blues* and *Shuffle* the neoliberal belief that multicultural exchange strengthens overall social cohesion is invalidated when the artistic prodigies at the center of each are linked to tropes of bodily abjection, death, and disease. Consider, for example, an exchange between Coyote Spring's lead singer Thomas and legendary blues guitarist Robert Johnson that takes place early in *Reservation Blues*. The elderly Johnson has been wandering since he faked his death in 1938, and explains that he "[m]ade a bad deal years ago. Caught a sickness I can't get rid of" and has come to the reservation to seek a traditional healer. Thomas is unruffled by the musician's strange admission because he too "knew about sickness. He'd caught some disease in the womb that forced him to tell stories. The weight of those stories bowed his legs and bent his spine a bit. Robert Johnson looked bowed, bent, and more fragile with each word" (6). Only one of several moments highlighting the concurrence of contagion and aesthetic production, these ailing artists suggest that something compulsory and insalubrious lay concealed within seemingly benign acts of cultural production and exchange.

Here, as in the other texts analyzed in this project, the disease that besets the protagonists is meant to suggest the complex and deeply rooted nature of racist thinking in postnationalist American society. The vague chronic illnesses attacking the bodies of both musicians are explicitly meant to invoke the chief contradiction operant within neoliberal multiculturalism: that it politically and economically excludes the very minorities it purports to culturally integrate. In both Beatty's and Alexie's novels, culture and creativity are clearly not cures for political disenfranchisement.

In this way postnationalist texts like *Reservation Blues* and *Shuffle* display a profound ambivalence towards forms of minority belonging evolving from cultural pastiche and aesthetic

hybridity. On the one hand, such acts lend incredible power, recognition, and mobility to the individual who makes his or her art resonate and connect with audiences of diverse backgrounds. But on the other hand, this freedom seems to come at the expense of the collective, as tropes of eclectic creativity are implicated with the commodification of minority culture and the dissolution of older communal bonds. This is made abundantly clear when the record executives who attempt to woo Coyote Springs are shown to resemble in both name and appearance the same trio of U.S. Cavalry officers responsible for the atrocities visited upon the northwestern tribes in the 1850s and 60s. Linking nineteenth-century military campaigns to twentieth-century marketing initiatives, and genocide to cultural tourism, Alexie denounces the latter as a form of erasure that is just as destructive as the former.

Like *Shuffle* and *Apex*, this ambivalence comes to a head during moments of temporal suspension that seem to resolve communal anxiety and spur improbable coalitions in *Blues*. This is most pronounced in the penultimate chapter of the novel, which describes the events that transpire after Coyote Springs's failed audition in New York City. The chapter opens with the tragic moment in which Junior takes his own life, and then progresses by moving backwards, day by day, to the moment the band returned from New York a week earlier. Though Junior was a minor member of the band and the least talented in the ensemble, his suicide temporally reverses and diffuses the communal antagonism that had been building against Coyote Springs since they started receiving national attention. First the reader experiences this animosity at its height, when several death threats are made against the band and they are placed under protective custody. This is preceded by picketing and protests against Coyote Springs, which were incited by the petty screeds the tribal chairman published against them the day after their return. Tragic though Junior's death is, in the novel's final chapter his funeral reinstates the normal flow of time and provides an opportunity for the novel's white, black, and native characters to nurture and support one another. In the *Blues*' closing scene, the community's change of heart is shown to be the

product of several actors working in unexpected unity: Junior, with his heartbreaking sacrifice; Big Mom, the Spokane's traditional leader; and the tribe's chairman, David WalksAlong. Prompted by these three figures, the chastened community rallies behind the remaining members of Coyote Springs, donating enough money for them start their lives afresh, in new (and more stable) professions in the nearby city of Spokane.

Yet unlike Beatty's text, the *dénouement* in Alexie's work definitively pivots away from eclectic expression and new figurations of the minority community. Notably, more traditional forms of belonging become prominent as the brand of cultural pastiche represented by Coyote Springs fades away. Thomas, Chess, and Checkers put down their instruments and take up a more instrumental role in connecting people in a nearby city,⁴⁷ and Big Mom sends them on their way with a song braiding together voice, flute, and drum. Their exodus also reinforces the political status quo, as the largest donation to the relocation fund for the young musicians comes from the corrupt tribal chairperson, who views their charisma as a potential threat to his incumbency. The identity politics embraced here ultimately fail to thwart the culture industry or to effect real, material sources of inequality on the reservation.

The result is that the novel, which struggled so hard to create a positive correlation between forms of cultural expression and grassroots collective action, lapses back into an elite-driven political hierarchy in a community annealed by a return to a more traditionalist understanding of Spokane culture. Thomas and Robert Johnson have cured themselves of their strange maladies, but Victor is left with no allies and scarred hands, so despondent that he quickly turns to the bottle. The New Age sycophants and sordid record executives may have been ousted from the reservation, but this does not stop them from joining forces to create a fake Indian band to fill the market niche intended for Coyote Springs. Aside from the Shadow Horses'

⁴⁷ Specifically, Chess and Checkers take jobs as telephone operators, leaving Thomas's employment to be determined. "Just call information...and maybe I'll be your operator" (304).

Song Big Mom teaches the Spokanes, the reservation community is still very much in the same position it was in at the beginning of the novel. In prioritizing cultural preservation over systemic change and personal responsibility over collective wellbeing, *Reservation Blues* resorts to a therapeutic identity politics in its attempt to defeat the forces of neoliberal multiculturalism.

The task of this chapter is to understand how the struggle between pluralism and identity politics evinced by Alexie's novel is both comparable to, yet divergent from, analogous discussions in postnationalist African American literature and scholarship. Despite the fact that both fields of study have been mired in a fierce debate over the collective belonging and the role cultural beliefs and practices play in securing political parity, therapeutic identity politics developed later and held sway longer in American Indian Studies than it did in African American literary and cultural criticism. I will argue that identity politics dominated indigenous critical discourses until recently because, ironically, earlier forms of cultural politics during the first half of the twentieth-century were not practiced in Indian country to the extent that they were in black America.⁴⁸ The differentiated development of identity politics in postnationalist Afro- and Native American literature and criticism stems from the wealth of political connections and points of contact indigenous nations had with the federal government, and the dearth of cultural influence, relative to their African American counterparts.

⁴⁸ African American literary critic Kenneth Warren has been helpful in formulating the distinction. He uses the term "cultural politics" to describe the strategic and instrumental use of cultural beliefs and values before the demise of *de jure* Jim Crow segregation. Under this political paradigm, cultural values were hortatory, meant to uplift, inspire, and create consensus within the black community, and to form semiautonomous organizations capable of meeting the community's needs when other conventional political venues were closed (*What Was* 51). This was displaced by a brief period of interracial, inter-communal universalism during the Civil Rights Movement until a sense of racial parochialism similar to the earlier model arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This second advent of cultural politics ostensibly arose to dethrone "the nation-state as the frame for addressing racial inequality," but it formed a sense of communal identity as inborn and nostalgic, that did little more than to reinforce elite governance (*What Was* 91, 116). Culture, in other words, had gone from a viable strategy for minority advocacy to one that competed with democratic and electoral means of representation. See "Future of the Past" in *What Was* for greater detail, esp. pp 81-117. For the purposes of my argument in this chapter, I've adapted Warren's "cultural politics" to refer to the manner in which artistic production and cultivation were used as a means of advocating for minority political inclusion and civil rights when all other avenues of advocacy had been foreclosed, which pertains mostly to African American and Latinx groups in the US before civil rights. "Cultural identity politics" or "identity politics", on the other hand, refers to the evolution of racial interest group politics in the 1970s and 80s, after the (partial) dismantling of legalized segregation, when the reigns of legitimate political representation and sovereignty were putatively given back to minority groups.

I. A More Diverse and Dispersed Politics

In the early twentieth century, for instance, African Americans lobbied for political and economic parity by countering discourses of scientific racism with sophisticated representations of black interiority, sensitivity, and refinement to counteract negative stereotypes lobbed at African Americans. Widely circulated periodicals like *Colored American Magazine*, *Crisis*, *The Messenger*, and *Opportunity* in the first few decades of the twentieth century, were critical in developing and regulating positive images of African Americans. Additionally, these periodicals promoted the notion that cultural and aesthetic production could have an influence in shaping social and political realities for minorities, and this in turn provided much of the impetus for the artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. The pan-Indian Society of American Indians published the *Quarterly Journal of the American Indian* from 1913-1920, but it had neither the staying power nor the influence of *Crisis*. Native American authors and editors were by no means dormant in this time,⁴⁹ but they were not collaborating on projects in nationally-circulated periodicals to counter the tropes of Indians as tragic and vanishing figures. Pan-tribal and widely disseminated cultural collaboration came later, which meant that indigenous nations struggled against stereotypes of the Vanishing Indian with fewer cultural resources than their African American contemporaries—at least until the advent of the Native American Renaissance in the 1968.

One of the most important differences that explains this discrepancy is demographic. At the start of the twentieth century, Native American populations are both less numerous than

⁴⁹ In that time many pieces of short fiction and novels by authors like E. Pauline Johnson (Mohawk), Christine Quintasket (Salish), John Joseph Matthews (Osage), John Oskinson (Cherokee), and D'Arcy McNickle (Salish/Kootenai) were published. These authors were not concentrated in and around a central cultural node, as the Harlem Renaissance writers were, nor did they share many publishing houses and benefactors with each other. Oskinson, in addition to being a novelist, was an editor at *Colliers*, Johnson's *The Moccasin Maker* was published posthumously by a Toronto Press in 1913, Quintasket's was taken up by a small independent publisher in Boston, and Matthews's novels were initially published by the University of Oklahoma Press. McNickle's works took the most conventional route, as he lived and worked in New York City during the Great Depression, and were first seen in *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1936.

African Americans in the United States and more culturally and ethnically diverse.⁵⁰ These demographics made it much more difficult for indigenous communities to resist the aggressive and wide-ranging campaigns to assimilate Indians into the Euroamerican mainstream that have stretched from the Revolutionary period to today. As author and critic Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) has compellingly argued, the drive to dominate and assimilate has been accompanied by pernicious stereotypes of Native Americans as doomed and vanishing peoples. These simulations of the *indian* (always lowercase and always italic in Vizenor's prose) obscured ongoing struggles and licensed colonial appropriations of indigenous history and culture by non-Natives. These romantic simulations—the “fetishized anti-selves” of white settler culture—tell us more about “the miseries of the modern man” and the affective fantasies that reconcile him (or her) to the metastases of capitalism, than they do about actual Native American cultures (*Manners* 37-8).

Yet while they had fewer cultural resources at their disposal, indigenous Americans were rich in political resources and connections to the federal government. The cultural politics that dominated Afro-American discourses at the time had no corollary amongst Native American intellectuals because there were so many other established political institutions Native Americans used to press for their rights. This dates back to the sovereign status accorded to Native American tribes in the U.S. Constitution. The unique political standing of Native American tribes stretches back to the birth of the American Republic, of course—and Indian groups have been recognized as separate sovereign nations since the beginning of settler colonialism on this continent. But despite these past practices and the official recognition of tribal sovereignty in the foundational documents of the United States, the role of the tribes within American federalism—where they

⁵⁰ The Native American population within the United States is about twenty times smaller than the African American community (2.6 million to 40.2 million), and it is divided into 567 politically-, ethnically-, and linguistically distinct tribes. It should be noted, however, that on a global scale the African diaspora is more diverse, given that there are nearly 2000 distinct ethnolinguistic groups hailing from the African continent.

stand in relation to the enumerated, reserved, and concurrent powers held by federal, state, and local governments—has constantly been encroached and thus is ever evolving. In the nineteenth century, for instance, key legislative and judicial decisions steadily curtailed the practice of tribal sovereignty and self-governance. The Marshal Court handed down verdicts in *Johnson v. M’Intosh* and *Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia* in the 1820s and 30s that limited tribal sovereignty and declared the tribes to be “domestic dependent nations” or wards of the federal government. In 1830, the Jackson Administration passed the Indian Removal Act, which cleared the way for many tribes to be forcibly relocated to reservations west of the Mississippi. In the next six decades, dozens of tribes from across the fledgling United States were compelled to migrate to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma, and many (in some cases up to 25%) perished or were murdered by bureaucratic ineptitude and malice during forced relocation.⁵¹

Towards the end of the Removal period, The Major Crimes Act of 1885 and the decision from *United States v. Kagama* overrode the right of indigenous courts to prosecute many crimes (murder, manslaughter, rape, deadly assault, arson, burglary, and larceny) and to try non-Indians accused of committing them on reservation lands. The attack on indigenous judiciaries was magnified with the passage of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, which abolished all tribal governments and courts and provided for the partitioning of communal lands amongst individual tribal members. The act was intended to speed the assimilation of Native Americans into mainstream American society, but in reality it impoverished millions by hastening the transmission of indigenous wealth and property into non-Native hands. According to

⁵¹ Precise mortality statistics from this period are unknown, as estimates vary widely, but the earlier removals appear to have been deadlier. The best estimates for the Trail of Tears, a 1,000-mile three-month march that began in late 1838, reckon that nearly 25% of the 16,000 Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws died or were murdered in the forced migration. Other relocations were not as large, long, or lethal: 4% of the 900 Potawatomes perished on the journey from Indiana in 1838. Yet these figures represent only two of the dozens of forced marches from the period. The Indian Removal Era, though slowed by the Civil War, lasted until 1896, when Geronimo's band of Chiricahua Apaches were the last to be relocated. For a classic overview of federal Indian policies around removal, see Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father*, pp 179-292. For more scholarship that focuses on the impact of removal amongst the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws, see Perdue's "The Legacy of Indian Removal," 3-36.

conservative estimates released by the Board of Indian Commissioners, over 77 million acres of land—roughly half of what had originally been accorded to the tribes—had been transferred to white ownership by 1900.⁵² The rapid theft of indigenous lands continued unchecked until the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which abolished Dawes and allowed tribes to once more organize their own governments to regulate tribally-held resources.⁵³

Because this government-to-government relationship was partly restored after 1934, and given the growth of pan-tribal networking in the 1930s and 40s,⁵⁴ the majority of Native American reformist efforts were directed towards working within and manipulating existing lines of communication to reinstate the sovereignty and rights that had been undermined by nineteenth-century removal and assimilationist policies. Though Native Americans, like African Americans, held very few elected positions within the U.S. governmental apparatus until after the Civil Rights Amendments were passed in the 1960s, other important avenues of influence were built explicitly for their use and had existed since 1824—like the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which was housed within the Department of the Interior. These avenues were not always open or easy to manipulate, but many underwent rapid expansion⁵⁵ after the Second World War, which

⁵² American Indian Studies scholar Francis Paul Prucha indicates that the Allotment Act and the many amendments that followed it were "to, many reformers...the most important means of destroying tribalism" ("Introduction" 3).

⁵³ Historian Thomas Cowger, in his *The National Congress of American Indians*, notes that the success of the IRA was limited—only 40% of the tribes adopted it at the time, suspicious of the BIA boilerplate constitutions they were expected to use, and wary of more federal encroachment into reservation affairs (21). For more on the opposition to the IRA, see Hauptman's "The American Indian Federation and the Indian New Deal" and Philp's *John Collier's Crusade*, 170-3.

⁵⁴ Cowger is also an excellent resource on how the IRA, though flawed, spurred pan-Indian organizing throughout the Great Depression and WWII, fueling the formation of the National Congress of American Indians, the most powerful pan-tribal organization of the twentieth century, in 1944 (20-9).

⁵⁵ The BIA had its roots in the Office of Indian Affairs (originally housed in the War Department), which was founded in 1824. In addition to the bureau, there was a standing Senate Committee on Indian affairs from 1820-1947 and from 1993 to the present. Castile's text *Taking Charge* is a fantastic resource covering the many Congressional Committees, Select Committees, and commissions during a period of heightened congressional activism in Indian affairs from 1977-1984, particularly 27-48. Other separate avenues for accessing the federal government came with the establishment of twelve Area Offices of the BIA to provide more oversight above individual Indian agents in 1949, the (albeit, infamously underfunded and poorly run) Indian Health Service in 1955 (housed within what is now the Department of Health and Human Services), and the creation of a separate Task Force on American Indian Poverty to administer Office of Economic Opportunity Community Action programs in 1965, the National Council on Indian Opportunity—which gave tribal leaders direct access to executive branch staffers in 1968, and the formation of the National Tribal Chairman's Association (housed within the

meant that Native American activism and advocacy were split between cultural and political means of effecting change—with the majority of tribal energy spent on the latter.

These established patterns of political wrangling shifted in the Civil Rights era, to take shape as an “inside-out” strategy in the 1960s and ‘70s.⁵⁶ At this time younger student activist organizations like the National Indian Youth Council and their regional chapters and the even more radical American Indian Movement (AIM) agitated forcefully for the honoring of treaty rights, the return of stolen land, religious artifacts, the control of tribal resources and governance, and much more, borrowing tactics from the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. As they manipulated the media and public sentiment from the outside, older bureaucrats within well-established organizations that had existing relationships with federal agencies—like the National Congress of American Indians, the National Tribal Chairman’s Association, and the Task Force on American Indian Poverty—worked from within to spin growing public sympathy into bigger budgets, aid programs, and legislative victories.⁵⁷

The most important legislative change was the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) of 1975. Self-determination was, and continues to be, a set of policies unique to federally-recognized Native American nations. The term “self-determination” was first used by the Association on American Indian Affairs in 1956 to propose an alternative to federal termination policies that had emerged after World War Two.⁵⁸ Termination policies sought to

BIA) in 1971, and the National Indian Gaming Commission (housed within the Department of the Interior) in 1989, and the formation of a permanent Senate committee on Indian Affairs in 1993. For more on the elaboration of existing intergovernmental relations, see Cobb, 102-130.

⁵⁶ The conceptualization of the Red Power Movement as a symbiotic relationship between insider manipulators and outside activists is commonly shared, but has been considered and examined most thoughtfully by historian Cobb in *Native Activism*, 125-46.

⁵⁷ There were several such successes in the 1960s and 70s—the Taos Blue Lake Restoration Act (1970), the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (1971), the Indian Education Act (1972), the Menominee Restoration Act (1973), the Indian Financing Act (1974), the Self-Determination Act (1975) (which I’ll discuss at length presently), the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (1976), the American Indian Religious Freedom Act and the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978).

⁵⁸ See Cobb for the internationalist sources that inspired the AAIA and its partner the NCAI, and both organizations collaborated to use Harry Truman’s Four Point program from 1949 to propose their own American Indian Point IV Program in 1956 (14-29). Regarding the term “self-determination” itself, historian George Castile notes in his *Taking Charge*, the

end tribal economic dependence through total assimilation of Native Americans tribes and dissolution of the tribes as separate sovereign entities.⁵⁹ Conversely, self-determination held that tribes ought to make the decisions that affected their people, and posited that economic independence can only follow *after* cultural and political autonomy are first secured. The concept was taken up as the ideological core of the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty, and was extended under the Nixon administration before the Self-Determination Act was officially signed into law. As policy, self-determination was theoretically sound and desirable both publicly and politically, but in practice it was a failure and suffered from piecemeal execution throughout the 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁰

The implementation of the ISDEAA was flawed for several reasons. Historians like Paul Stuart and George Pierre Castile both note that, while self-determination policies gave tribes the ability to contract their own vendors to implement federal services, the ability to set goals and shape programs was not. This meant that many tribes were trapped implementing anachronistic programs or enacting superficially symbolic improvement projects that did little to grow tribal economies.⁶¹ Russell Barsh and Katherine Diaz-Knauf argue that self-determination had the

concept of self-determination has been around since the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was first elaborated by Lenin, then taken up by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points in 1918, and it has been spread widely ever since (14-16). For my purposes, self-determination connotes the rights of peoples to determine their own political status, to manage their natural and economic wealth as they see fit, and to govern their own society. Sociologist Samuel Cook cautions that self-determination ought not to be confused with tribal sovereignty. He seeks self-determination as a set of tools requisite for self-rule, but not the guarantor of it.

⁵⁹ The termination era officially began in 1947, under the Truman Administration, accelerated with the passage of House Joint Resolution 698 and accelerated with the passage of House Concurrent Resolution 108 in 1952-3, and lasted until Nixon's address special address in July 1970, which called for its end. There is not space to discuss the full impact of the termination policies (or concurrent urban relocation programs) in the nuance they deserve, but Prucha estimated that about 13,263 Native Americans had their federal status terminated after 1953 (1058). These relatively small figures (about 3% of the Native American population at the time) were due to considerable political unity and organizing against termination at the time, as well as the fact that 78 of the 113 tribes who did have their status terminated were able to be reinstated after 1975 (Castile 9-15).

⁶⁰ This was until the ISDEAA it was amended in 1988, when block grants that included the costs of contracting and localization were included and tribes were given the ability to shape as well as implement their own programs.

⁶¹ A good example of this occurs in the opening chapter of *Reservation Blues*, when Thomas muses that the advent of Robert Johnson on the reservation "required the construction of another historical monument. The reservation was filled with those monuments years ago, but the Tribal Council still looked to build more, because they received government grants to do exactly that" (5).

unintended side-effect of drastically increased of administrative costs. This was because long-term planning and support for contracting services was not factored into federal grants and became the responsibility of each separate tribe. This meant that by 1978, most employment on reservations was centered in the public sector, and public administration became the predominant occupation on many reservations. Meanwhile, the sense of fiscal conservatism that had been building since the Carter administration finally found an outlet in a string of severe cuts to the federal budget initiated by the Reagan administration. Sociologists like Sam Cook and Joseph Jorgensen have long argued that the cuts in the 1980s—rather than spurring private growth—exacerbated public graft. This was because as funding waned, public sector professionals sought steady work elsewhere, and many tribal communities outsourced administrative planning work to the second tier of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the regional Area Offices. Because many indigenous nations lacked both federal support and enough tribal professionals to take on the tasks of administration, power concentrated in Area Offices. As money accrued and oversight waned, Area Office directors often channeled that what little funding did trickle down to individual leaders and tribal factions who upheld the status quo against more militant and radically nationalist activists.⁶²

The only difference the Self-Determination Act made, in other words, was that tribal governments, which had been weakened by long-standing local antagonism and federal mismanagement, were now partly responsible for directing the flow of the steadily shrinking federal funding stream. The early years of self-determination were therefore the antithesis of what former Secretary of the Interior John Collier had envisioned when he argued for the

⁶² For a more extensive analysis of growth of power at the level of the Area offices from the Economic Opportunity initiatives of the 1960s through the early years of self-determination, see Champagne. For nearly two decades, many Indian nations found themselves forced with a tough choice: to either rely on the professionally-trained personnel located in the Area Offices to administer social programs or to attract and train administrative workforces of their own despite uncertain funding streams. As Champagne has thoroughly argued, many made the first choice, and the concentration of power in the regional Area offices was accompanied by a lack of accountability to either the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs or to the tribes.

reinstatement of tribal governments, saying that the practice of self-governance was bound to have a “therapeutic” effect within Indian nations scarred by the Dawes crisis of the early twentieth century.⁶³ In short, the irony of early self-determination policy was that the elevation of more Native Americans into unevenly supported administrative roles fragmented reservations further and deepened disenfranchisement.⁶⁴ Problems that seemed to stem from external forces beyond tribal control were revealed to be deeply entrenched and nearly intractable even after the reins of power switched hands. Instead of reversing termination policy, the early years of self-determination were, as American Indian Studies scholar C. Patrick Morris famously quipped, an era of “termination by accountants.”⁶⁵

As points of access to the federal bureaucracy were both being multiplied and federal programs were being gutted from within by budgetary constraints, elected and appointed tribal officials were put under unprecedented strain. Under these conditions, the “inside-out” strategy deployed between more radical activists and establishment figures soured as one branch of the Red Power Movement, AIM, grew more militant and became ideologically less focused. Gerald Vizenor wrote several articles for the *Minneapolis Tribute* in the 1970s that detailed and decried this hypocritical and self-serving shift within the American Indian Movement. For example, rather than orchestrating Cop Watches by just following police in Minneapolis on foot with walkie-talkies, as they had in the early days, in the 1970s AIM cop-watchers patrolled the police in flashy cars with film crews—themselves becoming the story. While the early fish-in protests

⁶³ See Collier’s 1947 memoir for more of his ruminations on his sponsorship of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which effectively ended the Allotment Era and halted the federal attempt to privatize land ownership and to tacitly terminate American Indian tribes (85).

⁶⁴ The statistics in this regard are fairly grim. As sociologist Hillary Weaver noted, in the first dozen years after the ISDEAA was passed, rates of homicide and suicide were two and one-and-a-half times higher in reservation communities than the national average (160). Stephen Cornell and Joseph Kalt, who founded the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, also found the years following the passage of the ISDEAA to be straitened ones on reservations. During the 1980s 54% of Indian reservation households had no central heating, 45% were below the poverty level, 21% went without bathrooms, and 16% had no electricity (“Pathways from Poverty” 99).

⁶⁵ See Morris’s “Termination by Accountants: The Reagan Indian Policy” for more.

of the 1960s were anchored firmly in addressing the abrogation of treaty rights, later events, like the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 or the takeover of BIA headquarters in Washington in 1972 had sprawling political agendas, and found some protestors sporting elaborate traditional garb and engaging in acts of property damage—drawing headlines away from the policy proposals they had meant to promote.⁶⁶ While their contemporaries in the Black Power movement were writing their own manifestos, AIM activists were less adept at countering negative press. When AIM occupied Wounded Knee in 1973, they alienated whatever remaining supporters they had amongst moderate “insiders” by shifting their rhetoric to attack elected tribal official Dick Wilson after the effort to impeach him failed. Though the occupation ended after seventy days, tensions between AIM activists, the Pine Ridge Oglala Sioux community, and federal agencies remained high, embroiling AIM activists in several high-profile murder cases.⁶⁷

After the events on Pine Ridge in the mid-1970s, the once-powerful and principled grassroots movement addressing the unique problems faced by displaced urban and mixedblood populations lost much of its force. Though AIM was only a part of the Red Power movement, its downfall after 1975 marked a decided turn away from radical activism in indigenous communities, and many former AIM and NIYC organizers either left political life, turned to spiritual revitalization projects, or took up positions administering federal or non-profit programs in Native communities. At best, it was viewed as a noble failure, a movement characterized by “brilliant mistakes, misguided strategies, and foolish bravado.”⁶⁸ At its worst, it became

⁶⁶ Gerald Vizenor wrote a scathing series on the pitfalls of AIM activists for the Minneapolis Tribune in the 1970s, which are compiled in his *Crossbloods: Bone Courts, Bingo, and Other Reports*.

⁶⁷ Several members from AIM went missing or were murdered after rumors that they had been federal informants circulated—most notably Anna Mae Aquash (Micmaq), one of the highest-ranking female officials in AIM. Prominent AIM member Douglas Durrant was suspected of being an FBI informant and ousted in early 1974, and two FBI agents (Ronald Williams and Jack Coler) were killed in a shootout on Pine Ridge Reservation later that same year.

⁶⁸ Smith and Warrior 449. Among the more moderate accounts, Paul Chaat Smith’s (Comanche) and critic Robert Warrior (Osage) in their *Like a Hurricane*, argue that AIM was noble in intent and flawed in execution, but that the Red Power movement as a whole, despite the shortcomings of some of its parts, nevertheless inspired a generation of displaced urban Indians to take up the fight for tribal sovereignty.

synonymous with violent confrontation, kitsch, and criminality. At bottom, militant factions of the Red Power movement were the most culturally and ethnically diverse, the most critical of established leadership, and the least able to control their representation in the media—and they were thus more harshly critiqued by establishment officials than their counterparts in the Black Power movement.⁶⁹

The period of radical nationalist organizing in Indian country therefore differed from that in black America in significant ways. First, and foremost, given the well-defined (if shrinking) territories and well-established institutions and practices of self-governance of many indigenous communities, the grounds for constituting tribal nationhood were proximate and concrete goals, whereas those of black nationalism were more figurative and symbolic.⁷⁰ Second, the struggle against assimilationist termination policies starting in 1945 galvanized the forces of pan-tribal self-determination sooner. While integrationism was viewed favorably by many black Americans after WWII, Native American communities banded together to soundly reject any integrationist agenda, and reformist efforts centered almost unanimously around the touchstones of tribal sovereignty, nation-status, and treaty rights when proposing policy. Third, the wariness of “outside” political organizers from the Red Power movement, when coupled with well-established “inside” political channels of communication between the tribes and the federal government, meant that the majority of reformist, self-determination efforts tended to adopt more conservative strategies.

⁶⁹ Though major civil rights figures (like Dr. King, Bayard Rustin, Roy Williams, and Harold Cruse) did speak out against the tactics employed by Black Power organizers, the critiques leveled at AIM activists were far more vitriolic, accusing Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, and Russell Means (who would later go on to collaborate on Disney’s *Pocahontas*) of taking bribes, willfully destroying property, dealing drugs, and in general prioritizing their own self-interests over those of the wider Native community. For more see Vizenor’s *Crossbloods* and Vine Deloria’s *God Is Red*.

⁷⁰ For a more nuanced critique of black nationalism, and the internal and gendered contradictions derived from its figurative basis, see Rolland Murray’s *Our Living Manhood*.

II. The Rise of American Indian Literary Nationalism

Yet both Afro- and Native American communities were encountering similar external pressures in the postnationalist period. As calls for the privatization and deregulation of capital were actualized in policy in the late 1970s and 80s, many social programs were drastically cut or cancelled, and income inequality within rural and urban minority communities grew once more. In this environment, ethnic American literary scholars sought to understand worsening or plateaued economic progress in light of mainstream discourses calling for cultural exchange and hybridity.⁷¹ Both African American and Native American critics were asking a similar question: whether the commodification of minority cultural differences was the cause or the symptom of intractable inequity within their communities. The ensuing debates in African- and Native American literary criticism were analogous in that they took shape between a more conservative, nationalist school of scholars and a more liberal, pluralist contingent—between those who posited that the key to political remobilization lay in an aesthetics whose aim was to stabilize, protect, and preserve cultural identity and those who maintained that civic and economic parity was better activated through artistic works that privileged cultural mutability, mutuality, and exchange. Both African American and Native American literary criticism of the postnationalist period followed a similar trajectory—from an early engagement with Cultural Studies and Continental theory to a resurgence of literary nationalism, and then finally into a third period of renewed calls for a more materially engaged, pluralist politics.

Yet the postnationalist literary critical debate sketched above developed differently from (and at a pace quite dissimilar to) its analogue in African American letters. This was mainly because Native American scholars did not pursue a program of cultural identity politics until the

⁷¹ This was fueled, in part, by the rise of the New Age Movement and the marketing of Native American theology as the perfect tonic to the average American distraught over the financial crises and spiritual hollowness of the neoliberal era. See also historian Philip Deloria's "Counterculture Indians and the New Age" from *Playing Indian*. Cf. also Lisa Aldred's "Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances."

1980s, in defense against neoliberal multiculturalism. As mentioned earlier, there was more ethnic and linguistic diversity amongst Native American nations and less pan-tribal collaboration of cultural projects for the first half of the twentieth century than in African American letters. The renaissance in American Indian literature occurred several decades after the one in Harlem, in the 1960s, which meant that the field of Native American literary and cultural criticism was not as well-established as African American literary and cultural critique.⁷² In addition, the study of Native American literatures had long been dominated by non-Native anthropologists like Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock, who founded the ethnopoetics movement by transcribing performances and oral literatures as poetry in the late 1960s and 70s.

The ethnopoetics movement was roundly criticized for its inaccurate transcriptions, its inappropriate imposition of western poetic forms onto indigenous oral literatures, and its figuration of oral literatures as embodying and conveying reified cultural values intact and unchanged through time. Vine Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux) was an early, proliferate, and vociferous critic of these anthropological appropriations and misinterpretations of indigenous identities in dozens of articles as well as his book-length manifestos, stated that “‘Indianness’ never existed except in the mind of the beholder” (265) in his landmark 1969 manifesto *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Other critics writing against romanticized and nostalgic constructions of indigenous identity at the time were Barabara Cameron (Lakota), Chrystos (Menominee), Jimmie Durham (Cherokee), Jack Forbes (Renape/Lenape), Duane Niatum (Klallam), and Kate Shanley (Assiniboine). Several others continued this line of critique against stereotypical *indians* through references to deconstructionists and cultural studies theorists, like Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee), and Robert Warrior (Osage). Using Alfred North Whitehead’s process reality, Warrior argues that we must adopt a process-oriented approach

⁷² James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice date the Native American Renaissance from 1968-1995, and figure it not as the outgrowth of a political nadir but rather the byproduct of an incredibly rich period of activist politics and popular support for Indian causes.

towards Native sovereignty to conceptualize it through what he calls intellectual sovereignty. For Warrior, this is a critical praxis that breaks free of the “death dance” between slavish devotion to Euroamerican critical strategies and an uncritical adherence to insular and nostalgic narratives of the traditional past (*Secrets* 123).

Yet, as Warrior notes that the vast majority of the scholarship produced in the postnationalist period has “adhered in various ways to forms of idealism (whether liberal or radical) and essentialism” (xvii) producing a critical focus similar to the therapeutic cultural identity politics discussed in my other chapters. Such scholarship, though it strongly rejects racist stereotypes, also “risks an ossifying of American Indian existence” in its “preoccupation with parochial questions of identity and authenticity” in lieu of the material economic, social, and cultural realities that are elided by essentialist discourses. Taking their name from poet Simon Ortiz’s (Acoma) influential treatise from 1981, the following scholars as a part of his “literary nationalist” movement: Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna), Annette Jaimes (Juaneño/Yaqui), Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Dakota), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna), and Craig Womack (Creek) struggle to identify and elaborate strategies of resistance, but in so doing reaffirm reductive and reified notions of indigenous identity eerily reflective of the racist constructs they intend to trounce. Ortiz’s early work postulated that literary and cultural production by indigenous artists had a valuable role to play in establishing the historicity and beauty of Native American beliefs, values and practices, and could be counted upon to both assert the sovereignty of these nations and to translate their needs in ways mainstream America could understand and respect—a service Native American politicians and activists seemed unable to deliver on their own during the tumultuous era that followed the passage of the ISDEAA. This literary nationalist turn was meant to look both outward and inward, yet it reinstated reified notions of collective identity and reinforced the isolation of Native American communities when it also tried to prevent mainstream appropriation of native cultures.

This cultural politics resulted in many plots focalized around failed and ambivalent healers in literary nationalist texts. The neoconservative emphasis on personal responsibility within this and other literary nationalist texts is troubling. For instance, at a healer's conference at the close of Silko's *Almanac* (1991), with the announcement that waves of catastrophic earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, flood and drought are imminent, one character asserts that "certain human beings sensed danger and began reacting... all that mattered was, they were making preparations. When the time came, all these scattered crazies and their plans would complement an serve one another in the chaos to come" (755). It was this complex situation, I argue, that also spurred Alexie's presentation of social ailments as a disease the sufferer has partial control over and is partly responsible for. Consider, for example, that Robert Johnson's and Victor's wounds are represented as *both* a communicable "sickness" conveyed through the guitar *and* as a sort of self-imposed injury—the price paid in the Faustian bargains each made to become famous guitarists. Several of Big Mom's other students also presented in a similar fashion "with hands bandaged and bloodied," begging her to "fix those wounds [and] suck the infection out" (209). She cannot, she tells each, because "you caused all this. You made the choices" (210). Bodily abjection increases in proportion to the artist's thirst for fame, as the etiology of their disease shifts from an external to an internal source—mimicking frustrations with the implementation of self-governance policy after 1975.

I argue that this shift toward individual responsibility and conservatism arose from the continuing difficulties tribal Self-Determination faced in the 1980s and 1990s. After 1988 crucial amendments to the Self-Determination Act and the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act granted many tribes more control over their economic fates, and the following decade saw unprecedented growth in Indian country.⁷³ This political and economic empowerment came at a high price, though. The further *some* tribes moved towards real sovereignty, the more conflict *all*

⁷³ See Stephen Cornell's "The Political Economy of a Successful Policy" for more data that demonstrates this trend.

tribes experienced with neighboring municipalities. As sociologist Laura Evans has persuasively documented, after controlling for differing degrees of political sophistication and economic resources, nothing taxed tribal governments more than the racially-motivated antagonism of their neighbors. Anti-tribalism had not slackened, but had shifted to adopt new rhetorical strategies and new guises to attack indigenous rights from a number of different fronts. What ensued was a phase in which many indigenous nations continued to struggle to direct and sustain social and economic growth despite the lifting of significant obstacles at the federal level, a phenomenon Evans dubbed “soft disempowerment.”⁷⁴

This new form of political disempowerment was further exacerbated by mainstream misappropriations of indigenous cultures, which corresponded to the growth of New Age movement and the spread of multicultural policy in the United States. In *Reservation Blues*, the wariness towards cultural misappropriation takes the shape through repeated references to the predations of the recording industry and the New Age movement. Though the white New Agers who attend the Coyote Spring’s performances may seem fairly harmless, two of them—who briefly acted as the band’s backup singers—go on to win the recording contract that had initially been offered the band. The combination of Betty and Veronica’s talent, remixed with cedar flute and drum tracks and finessed with some tanning, hair dye, and plastic surgery, renders the duo “a more reliable kind of Indian” that can fulfill Calvary Records’ “economic need for a viable Indian band” (272). Upon listening to their new album after Junior’s funeral, Thomas runs through his HUD home, “grabbing photos and souvenirs, afraid that somebody was going to steal them next,” until he finally “gathered them all into a pile on the kitchen table and waited” (296).

⁷⁴ Evans writes that as the intensity of Indian-white competition mounted, adverse “interactions climbed, success rates fell, and careful and calculated interactions dipped. Hostility was exhausting and marginalized actors ended up depleted from the process. In the end, no one had to bother with classic tools of disempowerment...When tribal governments were spent, they were oftentimes incoherent. Such soft, indirect disempowerment often goes undetected...it’s easy to mislabel exhaustion as failed leadership” (166). Gerald Vizenor also hoped to capture the irony of this particular moment when he wrote that “the revenue from reservation casinos has not created a state of real political power; rather, the wealth has incited envies and the enemies of tribal sovereignty. Yet, in spite of the great risks of envy, who can argue against the fast money that has reduced poverty and increased employment on reservations?” (*The Everlasting Sky*; p xviii).

The futility of this gesture suggests that Thomas will not be able to keep Spokane beliefs from becoming gist for the pop culture mill in the future. Yet the dissolution of Coyote Springs and the end of his artistic career also suggests that he cannot intervene in the machinations of the culture industry and effect his own, more accurate translation of Spokane culture through more mainstream cultural forms. Unable to enact the literary nationalist formula for tribal authenticity Ortiz postulated, the text instead swings uneasily between the two extremes, presenting portraits of powerful cross-cultural expression before undercutting them in the name of more traditional forms.

Reservation Blues is not the only text from the postnationalist period that embraces an instrumental version of indigenous culture in the hope of healing the wounds rent by cultural appropriation and marginalization. In Paula Gunn Allen's (Laguna) *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983), the mixedblood protagonist Ephanie Atencio glides forlornly through San Francisco in the late 1970s, after she's completed her college degree and "sung the right songs and said the right things" in support of the Civil Rights Movement and the American Indian Movement occupations at Alcatraz and Wounded Knee, but feeling like she never really "belonged to any" of those struggles (67). A divorcee unable to integrate into the urban Indian community or to go home to her natal pueblo, yet also unwilling to stomach the casual racism of her New Age neighbors, Ephanie is plagued by depression until she receives a vision that heals her and instructs her to pass on spiritual tribal knowledge to the next generation.⁷⁵ Linda Hogan's (Chickasaw) debut novel, *Mean Spirit* (1990) considers a string of bombings, harassment, and

⁷⁵ The activism of 1970s cultural nationalism movements are implicitly linked to an endless cycle of vengeance and violence in the parable of the "little war twins" who, in setting out to avenge an insult, spark a battle amongst protective Katsina spirits and trigger an enduring spiritual imbalance in the world. This curse is the source of Ephanie's depression and listlessness, a "shadow that lay like plague on [Ephanie's] life, like plague on the land she was born, to could not leave, had left too many times" (183). Allen further draws on the example of Ephanie's Nisei ex-husband (who had been interred during WWII as a child) to argue that seeking to redress past racial insults cannot heal the wounds left by injustice. The source of healing is not in fighting further or seeking reparations, but to turn inward and to pass on the knowledge she finds there. "Knowing that only without interference can the people learn and grow and become what they had within themselves to be. Knowing that the measure of her life, of all their lives, was discovering what she, they, were made of" (212). All other avenues of action and intervention pale next to the puissance of those who "never used their power to coerce. Who waited patient, weaving, silent...who acted when called upon. Who disappeared" (212).

murders in 1922 Oklahoma when oil-rich members of the Osage Nation were systemically targeted for their wealth and mineral rights. At the novel's close all of the indigenous characters who had adopted Euroamerican lifestyles and values abruptly retreat from them to join a traditionalist community known as the Hill Indians, who provide a safe haven for those fleeing from treacherous prospectors as well as the diseases arising from their materialistic culture.⁷⁶

Leslie Marmon Silko's (Laguna) ambitious and sprawling second novel, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), is set on the eve of a 500-year uprising that will reverse the course of colonization in the Americas. In it twin sisters Zeta and Lecha begin transcribing a mysterious document, the titular almanac, whose encoded tribal histories and prophecies will give the shape of the rebellion to come. The unifying force of the revolt flows from a vaguely inherited and shared sensibility emanating from an unknown source. This sense of recurring "experience termed *past*" which unites the coalition of the ailing, disabled, and marginal is an experience whose "the essence does not change," though its details may vary (574).⁷⁷ This sense of a shared experience from the past guiding and directing communal renewal in each of these texts evokes a logic of heritability, homogeneity, and determinism that is little different from the racist forms of identity that have historically been attributed to minorities.

Diversity in setting, subject matter, and style aside, the commonality uniting these texts lay in the figuration of a mercurial culture, flexible yet heritable, as a cure for material social

⁷⁶ The richest and most afflicted Osage is a man named John Stink, who contracted scrofula from white settlers as a child. The disease has covered him with oozing sores and isolated him from the rest of the indigenous community, which he continues to haunt even after his death. As an alternative to the commodifying and insalubrious forces of settler colonialism, the belief systems of the Hill Indians are problematically rendered in highly generalized terms, however. For example, the path to the Hill Indians' settlement is literally called "the good red road" (304), with the most egregious instances ("Honor father sky and mother earth...a time will come again when all the people return and revere the earth and sing its praises" (361-2)) coming from a document a traditional medicine practitioner writes to amend the Bible. *Pace* reviewers Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) and Greg Sarris (Pomo), the Hill Indians' "affinity with nature sometimes appears hackneyed" (554), as a stereotype or simulation of the *indian*.

⁷⁷ Several of Silko's narrators go on to explain that direct communication amongst the rebels "was not necessary so long as you remembered everything about your ancestors" (604). This is because memories of the past enable adherents to "interpret the messages sent by the spirits" (604) as they wait "and watch the rest of the world for signals" (618). "When the time came, the people would sense it; they would feel it in their blood without recognizing what they were about to begin...the signals would be in the air—they would feel it! No organizations, no leaders, and no laws were necessary" (688-9).

maladies. In so doing, the above four novels evince a therapeutic cultural politics similar to that analyzed in the foregoing chapters. Laudable as these goals are, in practice they create forms of cultural belonging that were just as reified and reductive as the commodified forms of indigeneity they sought to surmount. As discussed in the introduction and first chapter, many scholars aligned with American Indian Literary Nationalism and its analogue in African American letters, the New Black Aesthetic, failed to grasp the full nuance of Stuart Hall's new cultural politics. In their attempt to embrace the revolutionary power of cultural politics, some ethnic postnationalist scholars scrambled the formula—which held that culture was a powerful site for revolutionary action, but only if it was first decoupled from any sense of inheritance or homogeneity. In other words, the revolutionary power of cultural studies lay in examining the inter- and intra-communal dialogues that produce cultural differences, not in attributing emancipatory potential to an established set of beliefs or practices. Acts of cultural identification were their site of inquiry and intervention, not specific cultural values themselves, because those values and norms were always changing and subject to constant negotiation. Yet rather than emphasizing the interdependent relationship between the mainstream and the marginal, several postnationalist scholars instead strove to codify a sense of ethnic belonging that couldn't be commodified. The result in both literary critical traditions has been a body of scholarship that is as deeply divided over the means to address the issues of cultural resistance, commodification, representation, and white supremacy today as it was in the wake of Civil Rights and Self-Determination reforms more than four decades ago.

Like their counterparts in African American letters—scholars Gregory Tate, Henry Louis Gates Jr., bell hooks, and Houston Baker—Native American authors like Allen, Hogan, Silko, and Alexie sought to walk a fine line between carrying forward the nationalist sense of “Native

cultural traditions as both the source and centerpiece of activism”⁷⁸ whilst differentiating themselves from the critiques of essentialism and sectarianism that hindered the preceding nationalist movements. Like their New Black Aesthetic counterparts, this has produced an ambiguous cultural identity politics that has polarized scholarly debates in Native American Studies. The field of postnationalist Native American literary studies is therefore similar to that of African American literature in the same period because it too has been divided between cultural identity politics and pluralism as marginalized communities responded to the unprecedented challenges posed by neoliberal multiculturalism.

Alexie’s meditation on appropriation took place against the backdrop of a number of large Hollywood blockbusters in the 1990s featuring romanticized renderings of indigenous history. Though this period also saw an unprecedented number of books and films created by and for Native American audiences,⁷⁹ the small independent and academic presses and production companies that put out work by Native American writers and directors simply could not compete with the market dominance accorded to major publishing houses and film studios. Though many eschewed the overt racism of their predecessors and employed indigenous American consultants and actors, films like *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Last of the Mohicans* (1992), and Disney’s *Pocahontas* (1995) nevertheless were helmed by Euroamericans and rife with historical inaccuracies. Frequently the nostalgic and inaccurate portrayal of Native American cultures in these films reverted to shopworn stereotypes of indigenous peoples as tragic figures whose way of life was doomed, which obscured ongoing struggles in contemporary Native communities to control their own land and resources. These films, coupled with continuing popularity of pulp

⁷⁸ Robert Allen Warrior, *Secrets*, 28.

⁷⁹ *Medicine River* (1993), *Lakota Woman: the Siege at Wounded Knee* (1994), *Follow Me Home* (1996), and *Smoke Signals* (1998) are three of the most prominent examples of independent films that worked with indigenous and First Nations’ screenwriters and casts featuring plots that unfolded in either the present or the recent past.

fiction written about (but not by) Native Americans,⁸⁰ provided a steady stream misrepresentation that dwarfed emerging work by Native American scholars and artists coming from small presses and independent production companies. Taken alongside the subtle machinations of soft disempowerment on the political and economic front, this deluge of cultural appropriation meant that tribes were engaged simultaneously in a more varied set of conflicts with their white neighbors.

It is the link between nostalgia and cultural appropriation that worries literary nationalists critics and authors the most. Literary critic Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Dakota) contends that the combination of soft political disempowerment and heightened visibility prompts her to proclaim that the systemic “plundering” of Indian lands hasn’t slackened, merely shifted shape. In this environment, she argues, the best means of countering political marginalization is by re-centering intellectual discourses around traditional indigenous cultural values. To do this indigenous scholars must foreswear the aesthetics of “the **new angry**”—prose that focuses on the individual struggling with various forms of structural racism—and instead “make a renewed effort to tell the honest stories, not for ourselves, not for an audience of idiots...but rather, as our ancestors always have...for the sake of the tribes” (63, *emphases original*).⁸¹ The authors working in this vein included Louise Erdrich, Louis Owens, Diane Glancy, A.A. Carr, Adrian Louis, and Sherman Alexie, and their novels generally depicted a mixedblood protagonist estranged from the native community who struggles gamely against racial oppression with

⁸⁰ Some of these works stem from the decades-long careers of British American children’s writer Paul Gobel (who was most active from the 1960s-2000s), mystery and thriller writer Tony Hillerman (who wrote his Navajo-themed stories from the 1970s-2000s) and the especially prolific Cassie Edwards (who published her Sioux-themed romances from 1980s-2000s).

⁸¹ As I suggested in my next chapter, this new aesthetic Cook-Lynn decries does a disservice to a vast and varied body of exceptional work. Some of the novels in this category, though they lacked overt references to tribal sovereignty and a uniformly positive portrayal of contemporary indigenous cultures, still managed to form pointed critiques of colonialism and its effects on indigenous communities. Erdrich’s *The Beet Queen* (1986) was the first to garner such criticism, despite the fact that the various negotiations of sexual identity undertaken by two white male characters serves to reference broader themes of communal fracturing, loss, and oppression suffered by those on the neighboring reservation. For example, in A.A. Carr’s (Dine) *Eye Killers* (1995), the plot centers around a Dine and Pueblo traditionalist working with a white school teacher to save a young mixedblood girl may not be overtly political, yet in its pages vampirism serves as a potent metaphor for settler colonialism.

ambiguous results and without endorsing an overtly political agenda. Cook-Lynn declaims this new aesthetic as dangerously ahistorical and apolitical, chiefly because it woos readers into the complacent sense that the expression of dissatisfaction on the page is revolutionary enough. On this argument, historical context is the antidote for the new angry, because history reveals appropriation—in all its forms—to be at the root of indigenous disenfranchisement, and once this is demonstrated a new political impetus will sweep through Indian Country.⁸²

If history tells us anything, it tells us that the land seekers are, and always have been, the dangerous ones. And, if the study of literature tells us anything, it is that the stories hold the secrets to our lives as much as does the land....that is why the question of ‘Who gets to tell the stories?’ is not only never far from our thoughts, it is the political question of our time. (64)

On this nationalist account, history and literature are alike in that both conceal the secrets that sustain indigenous life ways, and must be jealously guarded against mainstream appropriation.

Yet there is also much that is troubling about the equivalency Cook-Lynn and other literary nationalist critics draw between history and literature. How exactly do these secrets contained within stories and the land secure tribal sovereignty? How are they encoded? If the objects of historical and literary inquiry consistently furnish axiomatic truths, what’s the point of literary or historical criticism in the first place? By removing historical events and literary texts from the work of interpretation and imparting them with fixed values, the past becomes a vessel used to legitimize whatever concept the critic wants it to.

Thankfully, new work by Native American literary critics within the last decade has begun to move beyond the great rift Warrior identified between process-oriented scholars and those articulating a fraught cultural identity politics. This new critical school, identified by the

⁸² Nationalist critic Craig Womack also links history and political resistance when he writes that “historical context creates an identifiable course of action”, and then latter adds that “without historical specificity, Eurocentrism can never be resisted because it would be impossible to define what it is” (*American Indian Literary Nationalism* 128-9). As I stated in Chapter Two, it is not history or calls for context that I am skeptical of per se, but rather the manner in which history is deployed as a prop to shore up and close off certain forms of cultural belonging rather than an unfolding, shifting body of knowledge that requires rigorous interpretation and debate. The nationalist critics, I argue, often treat history as a stable list of facts to back up a set of claims, as opposed to a messier set of acts with complex and interfolded motives, causes, and effects.

moniker Daniel Heath Justice has assayed in his paper on the subject, Kinship Criticism, moves beyond the denunciation “of essentialist notions of unchangeability” (151) to focus instead on identity “as an ever-adaptive state of being ... [where] the ground is always shifting, the People are always responding to change within and without, new challenges require new or revised responses” (152). The Kinship critics—Justice, Chadwick Allen, Tol Foster, and James Cox, all strive to emphasize a processural and relational approach to cultural identity to focus on what identity actually does. Such approaches have been invaluable to clarifying the stakes of contemporary literary debates and identifying viable, process- and materially-oriented strategies of belonging capable of resisting the rearticulation of neoliberal multiculturalism. I will discuss this school of criticism more in the final chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COSMIC WEB: CONTINGENCY AND POSTINDIAN SURVIVANCE IN *THE HEIRS OF COLUMBUS*

*We heal with opposition, we are held together with
opposition, not separation, or silence, and the best humor
in the world is pinched from opposition.*
—Gerald Vizenor⁸³

*Laughter...speaks to a thick network of connections
forged across multiple differences rather than to dream of
secular thinness, ecumenical community, or a world of
national enclaves. A critical task today is to foment
laughter across multiple lines of difference.*
—William Connolly⁸⁴

The task of this chapter will be to understand the unique set of historical and political circumstances surrounding Native American Self-Determination policies that sparked the resurgence of a conservative cultural politics in novels like Alexie's as well as a countervailing, pluralist trend in several contemporaneous works. The novels falling into the latter category succeed in bringing the native community together while simultaneously resisting cultural instrumentality and challenging entrenched political elites. In many of these texts—Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer* (1994), Louise Erdrich's *Bingo Palace* (1994), and Gordon Henry's *The Light People* (1994)—the ability to heal the protagonist and the community wounded by cultural politics is not sacrificed in order to unite the native community. Instead, the degree to which the collective can come together is predicated upon the expansion of debate and the cultivation of contestation, ambiguity and uncertainty.

⁸³ *The Heirs of Columbus* 176.

⁸⁴ *Identity\Difference* xxx.

Healing, in other words, is dependent upon pluralism. In particular, Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* is a text that takes great pains to disperse power through a complicated network of agents, fostering embracing internal diversity and interethnic collaboration in the process. In so doing, Vizenor's work foregrounds a contingent and adaptive tribal identity as an effective means to combat the appropriation, commodification, and erasure of Native cultures.

I. Intermediary Literary Nationalism

Some postnationalist novels, like *Blues*, oscillate wildly as they denounce one form of cultural reification—found in the multicultural misappropriation of native cultures—yet substitute it for another, equally problematic vision of indigenous beliefs. This can be seen in the way in which Thomas tries, and fails, to convert stereotypes of Native Americans into more positive forms. One such moment occurs shortly after Thomas, Victor, and Junior perform for the first time with Chess and Checkers, after the newly formed band crashes for the night at the sisters' HUD home on the Flathead reservation. That night

Thomas dreamed [that] he sat, all hungry and lonely, in his house and wanted more. He turned on his little black-and-white television to watch white people live. White people owned everything: food, houses, clothes, children. Television constantly reminded Thomas of all he never owned. For hours, Thomas searched the television for evidence of Indians, clicked the remote until his hands ached. Once on channel four, he watched three cowboys string telegraph wire across the Great Plains until confronted by the entire Sioux Nation ... *We come in friendship*, the cowboys said, cranked the generator, and electrocuted the Indians... Thomas watched it all happen on his television until he suddenly returned to the summer when Victor and Junior killed snakes by draping them over an electric fence. (70-1)

In what follows, Thomas's dream turns to memory, and he reviews a childhood escapade in which the trio slay (and then accidentally revive) a deadly snake. He, Junior, and Victor run from the snake into a room where they find instruments and begin to practice, and Thomas worries

aloud that fame might harm them. Junior counsels that the band ought to “worry about playing our instruments better first” instead. Following the exchange

Thomas looked at his bandmates. He wondered what they really felt. He wondered what those snakes felt on the electric fence. Thomas held his guitar closely and felt its power, then noticed that he was holding Robert Johnson’s guitar. In the dream, he hit a chord, felt a sharp pain in his wrists, but the music tasted like good food. (73)

As Thomas shifts from hunger to satiety, and from passively receiving cultural narratives to actively shaping them as an artist, the novel champions the ability of the individual to transform denigrating stereotypes into something more nourishing and complex. Yet to do this Thomas and his bandmates must navigate new hazards, and learn to safely harness the tools of aesthetic production itself.

Put differently, the passage above is as invested in subverting racialized imagery as it is in understanding and manipulating the mechanisms of cultural production. Though Thomas despairs when he watches anglocentric programing on television, the real danger lay in its wide distribution, not its content. *Reservation Blues*’ emphasis on the current and connectivity that enable these images to be circulated suggests, therefore, that the deadliness of racism is in its dissemination. In progressing from the high-voltage telegraph wires⁸⁵ to the less dangerous electric cattle fence before moving finally to guitar strings, the novel intimates that the band can neither attack the network, nor run from it. Rather, if Coyote Springs is to disrupt the distribution of these disqualifying stereotypes they must manipulate the chords, master their instruments, and plug into the grid itself. Connection, rather than isolation, is key.

As with *The White Boy Shuffle*, the act of stepping into the maelstrom of popular culture is no easy or painless task. This can be seen literally, in the passage above, when Robert

⁸⁵ Telegraph wires were not themselves electrically charged, but could carry an electric charge if struck by lightning. A telegraph construction worker named James Gamble witnessed just such an incident in 1861, when he saw a western Shoshone (or Te-Moak) man receive a bad shock as he helped to install a wire during a storm. Unshod and without gloves, the Te-moak man received a shock to which the other men were insulated—but he was neither killed nor seriously injured (“Wiring a Continent,” par. 14). Gamble also supplies a more apocryphal account of a Sioux attack on the Sweetwater Station and Telegraph office in Wyoming in 1863 (“Wiring” pars. 15-19). For a more accurate presentation of the Sweetwater incident, see Todd Guenther’s “The Burnt Ranch Saga.”

Johnson's guitar physically pains whoever dares to strum its chords. Johnson had purposely left his guitar with Thomas when he ascended the mountain at the beginning of the novel to meet the Spokane's spiritual leader, Big Mom. The gift is a mixed blessing: the guitar is the product of a Faustian bargain and has been magically endowed with the power to bestow musical mastery and fame upon whoever plays it; but it also exacts a terrible price from its owners. After Thomas plays the guitar for the first time, for example, he "noticed that his fingers were cut so shallowly, as if the first layers of skin had been delicately sliced by a razor" (17). Elsewhere, the corporeal cost is always foregrounded in depictions of the band's practices, as when Victor, who takes over as lead guitarist from Thomas, "wore gloves when he played...but still suffered from little burns and scratches" (33). This is made to seem like a minor sacrifice, however, given the mesmerizing sounds it allows him to elicit from the guitar. The acoustic instrument is portrayed as powerful enough to fill the room with a wall of sound "that shook [the crowd's] fillings out of their teeth" even "without an amplifier or microphones" (34). Such music proves too difficult for the Spokanes to resist, as they are drawn to Coyote Springs's practices in a condemned building, dancing "even in the [summer] heat" until they "converted the rehearsal into a semi-religious ceremony that made the Assemblies of God, Catholics, and Presbyterians very nervous" (33). Here allusions to disease and pain foreground the corporeal cost behind moments of aesthetic production and cultural transmission, which cast the moments of collectivization that follow such artistic performances in a cultish light.

The trope of music or another form of cultural expression as sickening the artist and hypnotizing his or her audience is a common feature of 1990s ethnic American literature. Such enervated bodies are meant to allude to the contradictory logic inherent in neoliberal multiculturalism, which lauds culturally the very same minorities that it politically and economically excludes. The thingly and abject body gives the lie to multicultural ideologies that endow acts of cultural exchange and production with the power to unite the disenfranchised and

resolve structural inequality. This is clear from the outset in *Blues*, when Thomas catches a glimpse of Robert Johnson's scarred hands and expresses a desire to take him "to the Indian Health Service Clinic, for a checkup and the exact diagnosis of his illness, but he knew that wouldn't work...More than anything, Thomas wanted a story to heal the wounds, but he knew that his stories never healed anything" (6). Here and elsewhere the text emphasizes that Thomas's compulsive craft cannot heal Robert Johnson. Such failures shadow Thomas's success as the lead singer of Coyote Springs and suggest that his creative work, though compelling, is ephemeral and can do little to improve material conditions of reservation life. As his laudable aspirations "to change the world" with Robert Johnson's guitar and "to save [his] reservation" (16) lead only into the clutches of a greedy trio of record producers, Thomas aligns multicultural exchange and acts of neoliberal production with instrumentality and abjection.

If *Blues* were to effectively make a case against forms of multicultural tourism and commodification, forms of cultural production I call intermediation, it would pose alternative acts of mediation, as *Shuffle* does. By mediation, I mean acts that instantiate more bilateral forms of cultural exchange that engender mutual transformation and play, rather than the proliferation and consumption of static stereotypes. One character who seems capable of these transformations is the Spokane's spiritual leader, Big Mom. Wiser and far older than Thomas, Big Mom emerges as an artist who can adapt various cultural forms to craft original and invigorating new sounds. A larger-than-life "musical genius" who has mentored "all those great musicians who shaped the twentieth century" like Elvis, Hendrix, and Joplin (201), Big Mom is a respected elder who moves fluidly between past and present, western and Native influences, performance and teaching. Significantly, it is she, and not Thomas, who finally heals Robert Johnson's wounds.

Before she meets Johnson or becomes Coyote Springs's musical and spiritual counselor partway through the novel, Big Mom's narrative begins in a flashback to September 8, 1858. On that date, the U.S. Army culminated a campaign of retaliation against the Coeur d'Alene,

Palouse, and Spokane people with the extermination of a captured herd of nearly a thousand Indian horses. When Big Mom heard the horses singing a strange new song, followed by gunshots, she ran towards the clearing where the horses gathered. “There she saw the future and the past,” as a white soldier shot the last of the horses, which falls “to the grass of the clearing, to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern, to the cold, hard coroner’s table in a Veteran’s hospital.” After the massacre Big Mom carves a flute from the horses’ bones, playing it from the porch in her mountaintop cabin “to remind everybody that music created and recreated the world daily” (10). Using art to overcome the trauma of the past, Big Mom awaits her opportunity to mentor and advise the rising musical talents—whom she views as reincarnations of the slain ponies—in each generation. The horses here symbolize, not only the loss of mobility, political parity, and material wealth of the Northwestern tribes in the 19th century, but also the ongoing effects of that racial trauma generations later. As another incarnation of the slain horses, Coyote Springs is the product of systemic inequality, not its cure. If left untrained, their eclectic art form can be harmful rather than helpful for the community.

Through Big Mom, the novel strives to represent more active and self-aware forms of cultural production as combating such unending trauma. Her music heals where Thomas’s songs and stories fail because she encourages her protégés to look within to heal themselves. When her (literally and figuratively) bloodied students come to her she reminds them, “you caused this... You made the choices,” and that to heal is to “change your mind” (210). Rather than attempting to save such supplicants, Big Mom takes on the role of catalyst, inspiring her students to develop their own natural talents and to make the right choices. Music that is used in the pursuit of personal glory ultimately harms the artist and the community, Big Mom warns.⁸⁶ It is up to the

⁸⁶ Thomas came to a similar conclusion earlier, when he echoed this idea that the real problem with the Spokanes was attitudinal. Then he noted that had an effect on the Spokanes similar to the effect it has on the African American community: that the music “created memories for the Spokanes” because it “churned up generations of anger and pain.” Unlike the Spokanes, however, the black community does not “refuse to claim” those memories, but instead is united mystically in the slave cabin of Robert Johnson’s grandmother as they sing the blues together beneath the notes of Johnson’s song. This

individual artist to ensure that their work is performed in the right way, in the service of the greater good. Cultural production is not a uniformly positive act: it can simply reflect the status quo (in its intermediary form) or challenge it (in its mediary form).

An example of this putatively more holistic and unifying mediary music comes at the end of the text, as Thomas, Chess and Checkers leave the reservation.

Those horses were following, leading Indians toward the city, while other Indians were traditional dancing in the Longhouse after the feast, while drunk Indians stood outside the Trading Post, drinking and laughing. Robert Johnson and [another] man played a duet. Big Mom sat in her rocking chair, measuring time with her back and forth, back and forth... there on the Spokane Indian Reservation. She sang a protection song, so none of the Indians, not one, would forget who they are.

In a dream, Chess, Checkers, and Thomas sat at the drum with Big Mom during the powwow...[she] taught them a new song, the shadow horses' song, the slaughtered horses' song, the screaming horses' song, a song of mourning that would become a song of celebration: we have survived, we have survived. (306)

This stirring finale gives the lie to critiques that parse *Reservation Blues* as an unremittingly bleak portrait of a reservation community on the verge of collapse. However, it is paramount to note that the Spokane community coheres at long last only in the absence of culturally diverse forms of expression and the expulsion of the characters most closely associated with those forms.

It is Alexie's decision to nest this celebratory communal song in another that recovers a pan-tribal identity that is particularly perplexing. Here the instrument is not Big Mom's guitar—a massive electric one crafted “from a 1965 Malibu and the blood of a child killed at Wounded Knee” (206)—but rather a drum played in a traditional setting. Appearing alongside a

reclamation of the community “hidden behind the words” in the music (174), and has the added benefit of confounding white outsiders, who “heard those songs” but wonder why they “don't make sense” (175). Aesthetic production can resist co-optation and unite the community only if the listener can decode the past trauma and claim the pain concealed within it. Though it cannot actually heal Robert Johnson or any of the ailing Spokanes, its clear that the novel has elevated this encoded form of cultural production over the more eclectic version espoused by Coyote Springs. Though both forms of aesthetic production bring people together through pain, the former results in a more unified whole, where the black community sings along with Robert Johnson, whereas in the latter Coyote Spring's audiences only listen to their music. The effect the music has on audiences and the artist seems to be linked to the type of instrument they use to convey their lyrics: when Johnson uses his own instrument, his voice, he transforms pain in a positive way; but when Coyote Springs uses his guitar, the only pain felt is Victor's, as the strings slice his fingers. The message would seem to be that both the message and the instrument matter: cultural eclecticism pains the artist and anesthetizes their audience, but traditionalism energizes and unites the two. That is, of course, if the audience chooses to listen. Some of the Spokanes turn away from the memories generated by Johnson's blues, just as they turned away from Thomas's stories band.

remembered tribal identity, this reversion to tradition contradicts earlier depictions of Big Mom as a mediary figure who privileges individual agency and eclectic cultural exchange. At the close of the novel Big Mom instead promotes more predictable intermediary acts of exchange, ones that reproduce established forms of Spokane creative expression but which only nominally unite the community. The symptoms of systemic political and economic inequality—like food insecurity, lack of opportunities for employment, substandard housing, drug abuse, and political chronism—remain more entrenched than ever. Only memory serves to protect them from the systemic ills of discrimination.

Forging communal coherence and cultural survival by placing mind over matter, Alexie's novel reflects the turn from cultural nationalism to literary nationalism that took place in the early 1980s. This shift is commonly credited to Acoma poet Simon Ortiz,⁸⁷ whose seminal essay "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism" claimed that the common focus that united most Indian writers was the "struggle to maintain life and resistance against loss" expressed through a combination of Native oral traditions and colonial linguistic tools (10). This resistance is "a theme, national in character and scope, common to all American native people and to all people indigenous to lands which have suffered imperialism and colonialism" (11-12). However, Ortiz believed that contemporary Indian authors are not motivated solely to transmit painful past experiences but also a shared duty to advocate for native self-governance and self-determination. This balance between the "expression of sociohistorical experience" and the "persistent call by a people determined to be free" (12) is what defines Indian cultural authenticity for Ortiz, and it is this sense of the authentic that underwrites the emergent literary nationalism he identifies in this essay. This mode of cultural expression seemed capable of resisting both the assimilative policies of the 1950s as well as the nationalist forms

⁸⁷ See Warrior, Womack, and Weaver's *American Indian Literary Nationalism* for more on the seminal role Ortiz's work played in this movement. To read about Ortiz's rare blend of cosmopolitanism, internationalism, and postnationalism, see Herman, 9-18.

that followed them in the 1960s and 70s, crafting a mode of production flexible enough to meet the political exigencies of the present.

This literary nationalism—like its contemporary, postnationalist period in African American literature—differed from earlier cultural nationalism in that it theorized American Indian identity as based partly upon an oral tradition “transmitted from ages past” but also on shared experiences of colonial oppression and disenfranchisement imposed from without. Also like postnationalism, this expression of minority identity in literature as partly innate yet also partly formed in response to external pressures was widely embraced even as many critics argued that it did not afford any real deviation from culturally essentialist forms of nationalism, nativism and indigenism that had preceded it. In practice, this meant that the finely-hued definition of tribal authenticity that Ortiz developed—as a mixture between indigenous traditions and cross-cultural modes of expression—was deeply ambivalent. That is, these literary nationalist texts oscillated in between accepting the necessity of intercultural exchange and acts rejecting such cross-cultural production.

Although *Reservation Blues* frequently gestures towards the possibility of highly flexible forms of cultural belonging, none of these improvisational acts survive in any meaningful way at the close of the novel. The only durable songs are those of the shadow horses at the close of the novel, which echo through past perfect, present, and future tenses the assertion that they have, do, and will continue to survive. The complex forms of cultural mediation Coyote Springs and Big Mom were originally known for have been reduced, by the novel’s final lines, to more passive forms of remembering the past and gathering their community around it. As a figure who merely disseminates the horses’ song, the artist is a carrier, an intermediary vehicle for the reproduction of a reified culture. They cannot make their audiences remember a shared past, however, or even

try new melodies or use new instruments and sounds to convey the old ones. They can only sing and hope that their peers follow suit.⁸⁸

The novel therefore struggles with one form of intermediation only to endorse another. Thomas and his friends strive to tune out disqualifying stereotypes of Native Americans when they emerge on television and radio, to deny their encroachment into their home and community, but fail to alter these stereotypes or prevent future predation. The vision of intercultural exchange is a bleak one, as something that is associated with the reduction of Native American values into commodified packages that anesthetize, rather than mobilize, their audiences. Yet rather than challenging consumption with more active creation or adaptation, Alexie's text merely replaces eclectic songs with more traditional ones that prompt reflexive, not reflective, action.

II. Sovereign Opposition

As I mentioned in the introduction, however, there are several texts that do not fit within the literary nationalist model. These novels that do not trade healing for survival, rather, they emphasize how tribal sovereignty, political parity, and health can be secured if debate and uncertainty are embraced. In other words, if literary nationalist texts like *Reservation Blues* entertain ambivalence before resolving it to adopt a reified version of culture, what emerges in this second set of novels instead is a sustained cultivation of contradiction. Novels as diverse as Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988), Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991), Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*, Erdrich's *The Bingo Palace*, and Gordon Henry's *The Light People* (1994),

⁸⁸ This cultural historicism that is valorized at the end of the novel is disquietingly tied to biological determinism through Thomas's band mate and lover, Chess. Her opposition to Betty and Veronica's inclusion in the band is based more on the politics of their relationships with Junior and Victor (who she views as "betraying their DNA" by dating outside the tribe) than it is on any desire to create a pan-Indian musical group. Most disturbing, however, is when she proposes to Thomas that they should "have lots of brown babies," and that providing their offspring "two brown faces" to look up to is "the best thing we can give them" (284).

for instance, all nurture a tribal space comprised of the constant interplay between a dizzying array of forces.⁸⁹

Most notable among these is Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*, whose plot centers around Stone Columbus, a mixedblood man who occupies and renames Point Roberts (which lies along the U.S.-Canadian border in Washington State) as Point Assinika (meaning "place of stones") and declares to be a sovereign tribal nation dedicated to healing. After establishing a lucrative gaming operation, Stone uses casino profits to research "the genetic code of tribal survivance and radiance" he and a handful of others have inherited from their common ancestor, the famed explorer Christopher Columbus. Far more than an ordinary strand of paired nucleotides, these genes can heal a variety of ailments, and the genetic therapies subsequently developed at Assinika are offered *gratis* to the thousands of ailing pilgrims who flock there in search of cures. The genes heal, according to Stone, because they are the incarnation of "the everlasting opposition in communal imagination, ironies, and memories, the very energies and agonistic humor of tricksters and shamans" (135). If Alexie's novel chooses survival over health when it inadvertently privileges stabilized forms of cultural transmission over political agitation, Vizenor's text takes a different tack. That is, in *Heirs* the tribal community's wellbeing is intimately linked to its ability to unite a disparate and diverse group of individuals through a series of legal and political crises.

Contradiction emerges as the key, not only to healing and tribal sovereignty, but to combatting the cooptation of tribal culture in general. Both Vizenor and Alexie seek to identify forms of cultural belonging that protect and support native communities *as well as* resist the

⁸⁹ In *Tracks*, the narrative is evenly split between two foes—a traditionalist named Nanapush and a Catholic convert named Pauline—who grapple over the spiritual and political future of the tribe, and in *The Bingo Palace*, a similar contest takes place between a traditional healer (Nanapush's great-grandson) and a successful Anishinaabe businessman. *The Grass Dancer* features a faceoff between a witch named Mercury (who took that name because "an element is a substance that can't be split into simpler substances" (21)) and an ancestral spirit named Red Dress who speaks "in English and Dakota simultaneously. Not translating, two messages at once" (188). In *The Light People*, the protagonist can only grasp sovereignty, symbolized through the phrase "we the people", as a delicate balance between "the limits of understanding of what [the other] knew inside and through the limits of understanding what he saw outside" (226).

misrepresentation and commodification of those same cultural bonds. Unlike Alexie, however, Vizenor emphasizes something he calls “survivance” of indigenous cultures over mere cultural survival. In his collection of critical essays *Manifest Manners* (1994), Vizenor explains that this entails cultivating an “active sense of presence, the continuation of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name” (vii). This sense of presence counterbalances stereotypes of the Vanishing Indian, or more generally what Vizenor calls—always in lowercase italics—the *indian*. Vizenor draws from Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacra to describe the *indian* as a misnomer with “no referent to real native cultures or communities” (*Manners* vii) and therefore a simulation of the real, one that depicts indigenous Americans as uniformly tragic figures to justify ideologies of manifest destiny. The concept of the “postindian survivance” counters this absence of the Native American real by crafting “the sensation of a new tribal presence in the very ruins of the representations of invented *indians*” (*Manners* 3). The postindian, however, is not a return or reclamation of ancestral culture, but a re-visioning of those origins: the “heard and read stories that mediate and undermine the literature of dominance” and which “uncover the absence of the real.” The key to the survival and resistance of tribal cultures—the task of survivance, in other words—entails contradicting *indian* simulations with postindian ones (*Manners* 12).

Emphasizing chance, humor, transformation, and debate over the dominant culture’s commitment to causality, tragedy, reification, and dominance, postindian simulations are a crucial to surviving—and even thriving within—the milieu of postmodern commodification. Where *Reservation Blues* counters images of the *indian* in popular culture with a return to traditional values and the expulsion of the postnationalist artist, Vizenor’s work conversely fights fire with fire, troubling stereotypes of the *indian* with postindian conversions, reinterpretations, and mutations of those representations. In so doing, *Heirs* focuses less on the struggle of Indian artists than it does on the legal rights of Native American works of art themselves.

Vizenor pits postindian simulations against *indian* ones at the center of his novel in a federal hearing where a group known as the Brotherhood of American Explorers hopes to indict the Heirs of Columbus for theft. In this episode, Stone's wife Felipa stands accused of stealing several medicine bundles and the partial remains of Christopher Columbus from the Brotherhood's vault in Manhattan. Despite Felipa's admission that she is a "trickster liberator who poached tribal remains from museums" in the past (50), the evidence to indict her for the theft of the artifacts in question is circumstantial. A variety of postindian challenges are mounted to convince the judge that "ceremonial consideration and spiritual possession" of artifacts like the medicine bundles obviate "the common states of ownership" the Brotherhood claims to hold over the pouches (76). In essence, Felipa's defense argues that the Brotherhood never truly owned the artifacts in the first place.

In this passage, the heirs draw a sharp distinction between tribal possession and western ownership, or between "those who hear the stories" and those who "hold the stories" (79). Western ownership relies on characterizations of the natural world as alienable and inanimate, as something to be held; but tribal possession acknowledges the natural as animate and in motion, as something with its own agency and a voice to be heard. The instrumental worldview held by the Brotherhood is thus characterized by rigid, essentialist, and immutable simulations, whereas the constructivist stance of the heirs is comprised of flexible, postindian, and fluid stories. The latter are forged through constant dialog with their environment; the former attempt to control it. Because these tribal "myths, rituals, and stories...summon a spiritual balance, an imaginative negotiation in a very dangerous natural world" (81), tribal stories are nonhuman agents entitled to legal representation. The Brotherhood has robbed said stories of their rights, the heirs argue, by restricting their freedom to negotiate and circulate freely. By emphasizing the agential potential of such stories, *Heirs* distinguishes postindian simulations from instrumental *indian* ones. In so

doing Vizenor's work anticipates the distinction Latour would later draw between intermediation and mediation in Actor Network Theory.

Literary criticism on Vizenor's oeuvre has long recognized and praised his unorthodox use of postindian simulations to disrupt the popular production and consumption of Native American stereotypes. Louis Owens, in the same piece that illuminates the complex yet disqualifying forms of intermediation in Alexie's novel, commends Vizenor's critical and creative works for "writing against the commercially trite and culturally damning demands" that New York publishing houses push on Native American authors (68). Owens finds that Vizenor's postindian simulations challenge his readers in a "healthful and positive manner" in such a way that "exposes the falseness of the hyperreal fake" (69) and posits in its stead "a healthy, vital declaration of traditional Native American epistemology" (70). On Owen's reading, *Heirs* is not only a novel about healing but a narrative that can itself heal its readers, "cleans[ing] us of the heavy sludge of cliché and stereotype that eventually kills spontaneity and truth in art" (69). Articulating crass consumption to the internalization of colonial tropes, communal fragmentation, insularity, and ill health in several Native American texts of the late 1980s and early 1990s—like *Reservation Blues*—Owens argues that many of the Native American authors responding to Ortiz's call for literary nationalism have fallen far short of the mark. Such works can actually hinder indigenous self-determination by generating "shrewd postures...for an author who wishes to have an essentialist cake and to eat it too" (80). Owens offers Vizenor's oeuvre as a counterweight to this naturalizing impulse within literary nationalism, lauding his works as a "contact zone" (47) where different cultural identities interact more freely with one another.

The metaphorical healthfulness Owens assigns to this multivalent, dynamic, and "dialogically agitated space" of the contact zone (48), is due in part to the literal quest for health presided over by the mixedblood protagonists in *The Heirs of Columbus*. Children from many different tribes from across the continent, "those with unforgiven cancers, plastic faces, wooden

hearts, heads, broken tribal minds and dreams” (147) are drawn to Point Assinika in search of cures. The movement towards Point Assinika is pan-ethnic as well as pan-tribal, as several other allies—including Jewish police, journalists, and scientists, a Latino ex-priest, an African American aesthetician, a white weaver, a German robotics engineer, as well as scores of others desiring only to gamble in the casino—also travel to the new nation, seeking to meliorate the “loneliness of civilization” (81).

The heirs’ ambition to heal lonely and wounded refugees is imbricated in their quest to render tribal identities more inclusive. Stone’s secondary objective in offering genetic therapies for free, after all, is “to make the world tribal.” That is, “with an injection of suitable genetic material, anyone could prove beyond a doubt a genetic tribal identity. Germans, at last, could be genetic Sioux, and thousands of coastal blondes bored with being white could become shadow tribes of Hopi, or Chippewa, with gene therapies from Point Assinika.” By enabling anyone to become biologically Indian, Stone hopes to encourage “a return to other values as a measure of human worth, such as a dedication to heal rather than steal tribal cultures” (162). Uniting free exchange to the work of corporeal and cultural healing, the Heirs of Columbus privilege forms of belonging that are more open and mutable over those that are isolated and reified. If biological measures like blood quantum “have reduced tribes to racist colonies,” those who receive the genes and support the work of the heirs “have nothing to lose but racial distance” (162). Healing, in other words, is dependent on overcoming racial *and* cultural divides.

Yet not all of Vizenor’s critics link the contentious to the healthful. Arnold Krupat, though he agrees with Vizenor’s decades-long project to reconceptualize tribal communities around shared values of healing and exchange, not degrees of blood quantum, has expressed doubts regarding the use of tribal genes as a cure throughout *The Heirs of Columbus*. Genetic therapies are the first phase of the two-step healing process detailed in the novel. First, the “scientists delivered the genetic signatures, [and then] the tribal healers touched the wounded and

heard their creation stories” (144). Rehabilitation, in this light, would seem to be balanced between nurture and nature, a combination of human compassion and clinical techniques as scientists work alongside “shamans and tricksters [who] stimulate the trickster opposition in the genes, the ecstatic instructions, and humor in the blood” (144). When considered more closely, however, this becomes a savvy strategy on Vizenor’s part that allows him to elicit a productive tension between contingent and value-based forms of belonging and immutable, genetic ones—what Krupat labels “ratio-” and “natio-based” forms of filiation. Yet Krupat wonders why should a novel in which it is “unequivocally clear” that it is opposed to “any racist argument...[and] is set squarely against racism” should “embrace *natio-* as equal to or even more important than *ratio-* in the conceptualization of heritage and community? Does this at least apparently give aid and comfort to the forces Vizenor’s work has always sought to resist?” (61). Is there, in other words, a tacit reification and intermediation at work in *Heirs* that is similar to the form seen in *Reservation Blues*?

Specifically, Krupat finds Vizenor’s description of the healing genetic signature as “stories in the blood” to be particularly troublesome. The phrase, which appears over fifty-three times in the slim novel, is a highly problematic one for Krupat, whose critical debut was made by analyzing the “unfortunate essentialism” contained in similar phrases favored by Native American Renaissance writers.⁹⁰ This critique, however, does not seem to give enough credit to Vizenor’s deliberately intertextual and hyper-referential style. *Heirs* is no different from Vizenor’s other fiction in that it is peppered with allusions to political theorists and philosophers like Sartre, John Rawls, Richard Dawkins, N. Katherine Hayles⁹¹; numerous historians; literary

⁹⁰ Since the phrase “blood memory” was coined by N. Scott Momaday in his seminal novel *House Made of Dawn* in 1968, other prominent Native American authors like Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, and Vizenor have also made use of the phrase in their own fiction.

⁹¹ Hayles’s work has linked many of the earmarks of postmodernism in literary studies to the influences of systems theory, which emerged from the confluence of sociology and cybernetics in mid-century. Put briefly, systems theory arose when emphases on autonomous observers manipulating discrete, finite objects gave way to an interest in inter-relational and

theorists like Derrida...and even Krupat's own body of critical work. Critic Chadwick Allen, for instance, posits that Vizenor's use of "stories in the blood" is a deliberate allusion to the tempest Krupat stirred in the late 1980s when he argued that author N. Scott Momaday's (Kiowa) use of the phrase "memories in the blood" represented an essentialist recidivism within the Native American Renaissance.

Allen's thorough account delves into Krupat's, Momaday's, and Vizenor's broader bodies of work to uncover a more finely nuanced reading of the task that phrases like "stories in the blood" perform. Given that blood quantum has been used since the late nineteenth century to control tribal enrollment and restrict access to federal services, it is a measurement that has come to embody the lack of control Native American communities have over their individual and collective identities. In this context, physical and biological racial markers have become the very means of disenfranchising the Native community—effecting the opposite of tribal self-determination. Allen argues that in this context Momaday and other Native American Renaissance authors appended "stories" to "blood" to slyly impart a degree of uncertainty and to regain control over the construction of tribal identities.

Momaday's and Vizenor's concept of blood or genetic memory is thus far more inclusive than it first appears. With phrases that unite the visceral, corporeal body to notions of the collective, quixotic, and ephemeral realm of memory, these authors are "blurring the distinctions between racial identity and narrative" (Allen 94). In so doing, they transform blood quantum from a tool used to delineate tribal communities to something that is both product of the past as

dynamic exchanges taking place between different agents and their environments. This meant that the notion of a distinct frontier between the subject and the object faded to give rise to the field. The field, much like the Latourian network, stresses that interaction between any two agents, concepts, or entities has the potential to be *either* multidirectional and multivalent *or* closely constricted and scripted. The type of bond is then expressed in one of two ways: either as a relationship of dominance and subordination or one of collaboration, co-adaptation, and coevolution. Hayles sought to extend this emphasis on how information was being transmitted—focusing on the types of relationships between transmitter and receiver rather than the content of the messages exchanged—in what she called the "field notion of culture" in her work *The Cosmic Web* (22). In this text Hayles reasoned that if systems theory found that a certain amount of disorder, indeterminacy, and contingency was ineluctable, and even desirable, within any given system, such indeterminacy may also prove fruitful when applied to forms of cultural knowledge and exchange. Vizenor has incorporated this type of contingency and indeterminacy into his work by referring to the trickster as "'a cosmic web' in the imagination" (*Trickster* xi).

well as process of recreation, remembrance, and recollection of that past. In his memoirs and interviews, for instance, Momaday highlighted the uncertain source of these memories, himself unable to tell if “it’s something I’m imagining or something that I remember...[b]ut it comes down to the same thing.” In such a context, “genetic memory is potentially accessible to all willing to imagine such an idea of themselves” (Allen 105). Blood memory, in other words, is a constructivist form of belonging, and not an essentialist remnant of the natio- Krupat fears.

Vizenor, following in Momaday’s footsteps, has been similarly cagey about exactly where these “stories in the blood” come from and how they are formed. At some times, the stories appear to be synonymous with genetic inheritance, “a nonesuch genetic code” found within mitochondrial DNA that has passed, unbroken, from mothers to their children. Originally Mayan, these genes were passed from traveling shamans to Sephardic Jews in Europe, from whom Columbus was descended.⁹² This view is upheld when Pir Cantrip, one of the genetic scientists in the novel, calls the stories in the blood “genome narratives...a metaphor for racial memories, or the idea that we inherit the structures of language and genetic memories” (136). Here Krupat notes that Cantrip’s “two phrases are variants of each other; ‘stories in the blood’ is in synonymous, not metaphorical or figurative, relation to the notion of ‘racial memories’” (60). This is evidence of Vizenor’s postmodern refusal to resolve the contradiction between ratio- and natio-, according to Krupat, an act that fails because it relies on the very racist forms of belonging the work elsewhere seems bent on challenging.

Yet the identity Cantrip draws between genes and stories in the blood is complicated by other descriptions of the narratives as distinct from a static code. Before Cantrip’s characterization of the stories as heritable, for instance, another member of the heirs explains that “seasonal resurrections create new stories in the blood, stories that honor new memories, a new

⁹² Allusions like these, uniting members of old and new world tribes, are common throughout *Heirs*. For more on figures of intercultural exchange between Sephardic and North American First Nations in contemporary American literature, see Rubenstein’s intriguing study, *Members of the Tribe*.

inheritance” (18), crafting a more flexible, non-essentialist notion of heritability. The narrator also later contradicts Cantrip’s statement to attest that the stories and the genes are two distinct halves of the healing equation, saying that “the new moieties to heal were the genes of survivance and the stories in the blood” (144). The narrator then goes on to explain that the stories that activate the genetic therapy are akin to a sort of honoring or acknowledgment of the dream bodies the wounded pilgrims had imagined for themselves. The heirs and other healers (here referred to as “the blues”) “dreamed their blue bodies with the children, and the blues touched them with humor; the scientists implanted the genes of the heirs...the children became their dreams, the memories their bodies carried from the stone” (146). With this deliberately vague passage, the narrative voice undoes the more causal and rationalist explanations of the scientist as it becomes unclear as to who controls the collective dreaming, whose memories are being carried forward from the past, and whether the imagined stories in the blood—the whole, healed, dream bodies—precede or proceed from the introduction of the tribal genes. Given the emphasis the narrative voice lays on mutability and moiety nearer to the end of the novel, Allen’s interpretation of the tropes of blood memory as means of making tribal identity more inclusive seems more persuasive than Krupat’s more pessimistic reading of it as an essentialist throwback. The stories transmute the essentialist arithmetic of blood quantum “into a subjective system of recognizing Indian indigeneity, narratives, and memories” (111).

The strongest argument to support an interpretation of the “stories in the blood” as an anti-essentialist means of imaging communal belonging can be seen when even nonhuman members of the new nation, a group of robots, are able to begin healing wounded pilgrims. Incapable of receiving or expressing any part of the tribal genetic code, these robots are able to hold “the best trickster stories, and their modern variations” in their memory banks, “stories that would liberate the mind and heal the bodies of the children” (158). Oscillating between freedom and fitness, stories in the blood are here described in an agential way, similar to the stories heard

within the artifacts during the court scene analyzed earlier. Here it is crucial to note that the stories are neither fixed nor themselves affixed to an object or body. Instead, the stories are dynamic agents that move between the physical and the immaterial, between the body and the mind, upsetting settled binary relationships. So are these stories metaphors for biological determinism or constructivism? Intermediaries or mediators? An expression of genetic fate or humankind's power to reshape, reimagine, and mend the bodies we have been given? Pointedly, Vizenor refuses to decide, deliberately crafting contradiction and paradox. The stories in the blood can serve as essentialist devices or anti-essentialist ones depending on how they are used and interpreted.

III. Paradoxical Pluralism

Vizenor's articulation of paradoxical embodiment to a more healthy exercise of sovereignty resonates with the work political scientist William Connolly was doing to revise theories of pluralism in the 1980s and 1990s. Connolly argues that the postnationalist period is a time in which individual and group identity formations come under new and unprecedented strains as the accelerating pace of globalization rendered all forms of belonging more porous and precarious. This experience of contingency, in turn, exacerbates the fundamental contingency that informs identity: that the self depends on others to define itself, and therefore needs others to assert its own coherence and autonomy. Responses to this conundrum take one of two forms. The first reasserts mastery and naturalizes and depoliticizes the relationship between self and others, whereas the second questions this binarization and politicizes these relationships. These represent hegemonic and pluralist responses to the paradoxical relationship between identity and difference, according to Connolly. If the former represents "an antagonism in which each aims initially at conquest or conversion of the other" the latter allows this "to become an agonism in which each treats the other as crucial to itself in the strife and interdependence of

identity\difference” (178-9). Pluralism distributes power more evenly between many sovereign agents, whereas hegemony only justifies the accumulation of power one sovereign wields over many subordinate subjects.

The body is the privileged site for encapsulating this paradoxical relation between agency and dependency, or self and otherness, because it “forms an indispensable basis of discourse about identity and an insufficient and unreliable basis from which to draw culturally unmediated representations”, serving as that which “exceeds the organization of a discourse nonetheless unable to proceed without it” (Connolly 175-6). Under the hegemonic approach, bodies are labeled as either normal or deficient and subjected to increased surveillance and regulation, but under pluralism the body serves as a rich indeterminacy that troubles the neat parameters of self and group identity. We see evidence of this first response in Alexie’s novel, where the wounded are constantly admonished to heal themselves and to take responsibility for the choices they’ve made.⁹³ Vizenor’s work clearly embraces a pluralist approach to difference when it renders the physically ailing as both the reflection of myriad social ills but also the thing that prompts a new, inclusive, and more healthful community to form at Point Assinika. The physical body is both the source of essentialist narratives of tribal identity but also the wellspring for the genes that can be traced across continents, oceans, and centuries, linking colonizer to colonized to overcome “racial distance” and the “racist arithmetic” of blood quantum (*Heirs* 162).

The beauty of agonistic pluralism is that it maintains a respectful relationship towards difference: it acknowledges the necessity of identitarian distinctions without reifying, dominating, or assimilating others. It is a paradigm that prioritizes bilateral, mutual transformation without the comfort offered by eventual synthesis or syncretism—espousing a

⁹³ There are important resonances here with Adolph Reed’s theories of the late 1980s and 90s in African American culture as well, notably on how a group of political and cultural elites rose on a fictitious mandate to speak on behalf of an exaggerated underclass too beleaguered to represent themselves. Reed argues that this group of political elites were compromised by repeated overtures to the interests of capital, and sought to justify the growing class disparity between them and their constituencies by labeling the underclass as both physically and morally diseased; as a moribund population that perversely embraced the culture of poverty.

passionate “pathos of distance” in which two entities are inextricably bound, unable to either merge nor fully separate (Connolly 179). Rather than seeking to substitute one type of difference for another, what Vizenor does is to posit a different *logic* of difference.⁹⁴ Emphasizing inclusion over isolation, *Heirs* models a different approach to ethnoracial interactions, a shift from fixed binaries to more ambiguous partnerships that lauds exchange, play, and uncertainty. For Alexie’s cultural survival Vizenor substitutes a “chance survivance” which marks “the end of domination in literature” yet also “a new kind of existentialism, a source of identity—not the French aesthetic existentialism but tribal existentialism...the discovery of self through action.”⁹⁵ This contingent and contentious approach to belonging may be risky, but Connolly argues that the emphasis on contestability afforded by his new pluralism destabilizes hegemony and ensures diversity within and between different ethno-racial groups, thereby reducing political and economic inequality overall.

Vizenor has frequently made use of the figure of the trickster to encompass this “different logic of difference” promulgated by pluralism. In a novel published just before *Heirs*, *The Trickster of Liberty*, his narrator explains that if consciousness is considered to be a “historical relationship between boat and water...[then] the trickster is imagination, the humor between our minds and bodies, boats and water” (xii). The trickster in this sense is not a real person but a figure, a trope or “a comic holotrope” that holds together opposites—“‘a cosmic web’ in the imagination” (xi). Yet it is important not to confuse trickster agonism with syncreticism or hybridity—the trickster holds two elements in opposition, not as a step towards synthesis, but as a way of encouraging dialog between the two. A trickster model of exchange privileges imaginative suspension and play both within and between different cultures. Such a paradigm

⁹⁴ In so doing, Vizenor anticipates by several years the plea Stuart Hall made for a new approach to the relationship between identity and difference in his 1993 essay “What’s ‘Black’ about Black Popular Culture?”

⁹⁵ “Headwater: an Interview with Gerald Vizenor,” p 54.

treats “cultural interaction as interpenetrating fields” critic Ellen Arnold writes, and “can avoid either-or traps of assimilation *versus* resistance, and it can also extend ideas of cultural hybridity or syncretism to include more complex kinds of interactions that produce new modes of thinking and being but do not necessarily obscure or obliterate difference” (531). A comic and quixotic figure, the trickster in Vizenor’s oeuvre represents a condition or position that precipitates uncertainty and diversity, similar to the mediator in Latour’s studies. Crossbloods—like Stone, Felipa, and the other heirs of Columbus—“are the best tricksters” (xii) because they preserve difference and diversity both *between* and *within* indigenous and mainstream cultures.

In *Heirs*, this pluralist agonism takes shape through multiple arguments, debates, and disagreements that crop up within the community as well as between it and other sovereign nations. Raucous and heated interchanges often flare up between the heirs, their allies, the pilgrims, and the gamblers—debates which are often raised but never definitively settled, resulting only in a series of provisional *détentes*. For instance, the scientists clash with the children over the sentience of trees and the color blue, the aestheticians square off against tribal investigators regarding child welfare, and several feminists repeatedly lobby Stone to establish a separate women’s-only pavilion. Rather than fragmenting the community at Point Assinika, however, these disagreements strengthen it and give sharper definition to the common goal the citizens of Assinika *do* consistently share: that of healing the lonely souls and broken bodies that come their way with all the tools at their disposal. The community also flourishes despite external opposition from the tribal council at Stone’s natal reservation (White Earth, in Minnesota), various pharmaceutical corporations, as well as the federal governments of the United States and Canada. Though the White Earth tribal government is at various points described as addicted “to cold federal metal” (73), “obtrusive and bothersome...and determined to remove the heirs” (120), and “corrupt” (155), at a crucial junction “those same tribal politicians would later protect the casino members when they learned of the international

conspiracies to murder the heirs,” when their genetic therapies eat into pharmaceutical profits (75). Caught in a web alongside two world powers, corporate interests bent on protecting their bottom line, foreign consultants sniffing out new investments, and various factions from the tribal world, the Heirs seem to thrive on a field of constantly shifting allegiances, obligations, and grudges. A nationally syndicated talk radio show follows each and every political maneuver, bringing the fascinating chess game to rapt audiences everywhere and even inspiring a few to call in as the heirs field comments, praise, vitriol, and engage in a debate with an even larger audience.

This pluralist model, of power dispersed between several actors and of consensus built only through constant debate, serves as a basis for more contingent forms of communality.⁹⁶ Rather than evoking a vision of traditional culture as the cure-all to unite the tribal nation, as Alexie does, Vizenor conjures instead the specter of timeless opposition. For instance, the “insurrection” begun when Stone and the other heirs annex Point Roberts and convert it into Point Assinika devolves into an open-ended standoff between the heirs, the Anishinaabe nation, and the governments of the United States and Canada. The small cadre at the point is protected from the “military units that have been activated in the area” by the implicit threat of the “war herb” that Stone discovers (130). This “soldier weed” possesses “the power to eliminate humans, time, and civilization...[and] in the right combination the herb causes people to vanish from memory and history” (126). The guarantee of the thermonuclear-like herb allows the heirs to establish their sovereign nation and the genome program with relatively little interference, and once they’ve done so they are able to prove definitively that they do indeed share Columbus’s DNA. At this juncture Stone issues an ultimatum, and demands the reward the Spanish monarchs

⁹⁶ Here political theorist William Connolly’s work may again prove helpful. In *Identity/Difference*, for instance, Connolly explains that “agonistic democracy...depart[s] from the political minimalism of democratic individualism” by “disturbing the dogmatization of identity, and fold care for the protean diversity of human life into the strife and interdependency” of both forms of belonging and forms of differentiation (x).

had promised Columbus over five centuries ago. “These rights and capitulations have never been abrogated by treaties, conquest, or purchase; therefore, since we are the legal heirs of the unpaid tithe on this continent, be so advised, that unless your government pays the inheritance due, we shall annex, as satisfaction of the tithe, the United States of America” (160).

Enraged at having their own tactics, notably the threat to terminate another nation’s sovereignty and assimilate all of its territory, turned against them, U.S. federal agents bring an ancient Anishinaabe enemy into the fray. The aggressor is a cannibalistic water demon known as a wiindigoo. The demon wears the guise of a handsome, clean-shaven blonde man (21, 177) and is a notoriously savvy gambler who toys with his victims by allowing them to play games of chance for their lives. The Anishinaabe only narrowly escaped him in the past, when another, friendly manitou interrupted the demon before he could turn over the moccasin that revealed the winning coin. Now the wiindigoo appears at Assinika and demands to resume the final round of the moccasin game begun generations ago, and to play the heirs for the fate of the tribe. Four moccasins are placed in a row in front of the wiindigoo, and four coins are hidden beneath them. If he chooses the moccasin that conceals the specially marked coin, the demon wins and will devour the tribal children and the heirs. Just before he chooses the fateful moccasin, however, Stone reveals that he has hidden the soldier weed with the marked coin. “The war herb would end the tribe, the heirs, the children, the nation, the world you are so eager to devour” Stone warns, saying that it “would terminate the world, a bioactivated evanescence, only you and the robots would survive.” Considering its dependency on tribal victims to ground its own identity, the demon demurs, and so chooses an uncertain enmity over dominance, disappearing into the shadows after he intones ominously “the game never ends” as “the children danced on the marina, and their wounds were healed once more in a moccasin game with demons” (182).

Here Stone fights fire with fire, countering the threat of tribal termination, represented by the wiindigoo, with the threat of total annihilation contained within the soldier weed. Connolly

posits that such instances of mutual precarity “might provide a common point of departure through which agonistic respect can be cultivated between contending identities” because “the universal struggle with mortality can sometimes solicit in the self a fugitive experience of identification with life that stretches below and above any particular identity” (166). In this light, Stone’s ultimatum is not so much a heedless dare as it is a reminder of the endless possibilities and potentialities that escape us all, an admonition to consider that everyone is characterized by something more, a fugitive excess that escapes our best efforts to explain and incorporate it. This shared capacity to imagine ourselves otherwise is what unites us, what binds us across difference in “an ethic of care for life” (167). Diversity can only be preserved if we challenge the comforts of identity and belonging and embrace uncertainty, ambivalence, and risk—not their suppression.

This entails a dynamic relationality, a trickster pluralism that holds together opposites without reduction, and valorizes interdependency without assimilation, is what sets survivance apart from survival. This differentiates Vizenor’s novel, and other pluralist postnationalist Native texts, apart from the literary nationalist works of authors like Ortiz, Sherman Alexie, and Leslie Marmon Silko. What survival amounts to in these latter works is separation, where tacitly racist forms of belonging that arise in an attempt to insulate American Indian culture from commodification, end up reinforcing the social and economic isolation of reservation communities and entrenching the political status quo. But survivance entails something else entirely, and binds wellness to unceasing contact, conflict, and exchange. Set adrift, yet simultaneously more tightly bound, the collective in Vizenor’s novel has come together by ignoring existing political and racial boundaries to anchor their community in a shifting and democratically selected set of values, beliefs, and practices. On such seas, it would seem, we have no recourse but to cleave together, companions but not compatriots, opponents but not enemies, riding out the rough swells of existence together.

CHAPTER FIVE

“WERE YOU CURED?”: LATENCY AND NATIONALISM IN THE NOVELS OF LOUISE ERDRICH

*You heal by taking on the pain of others, by going down to
argue with death itself, by swallowing the sharp bone and
vomiting the sickness out in your own blood.*
—Louise Erdrich⁹⁷

Louise Erdrich's tenth novel, *Four Souls* (2004), is the much anticipated sequel to her third novel, *Tracks*, which chronicled the life of Fleur Pillager as she struggled to keep her land and community intact throughout the tumultuous Allotment Era on a reservation in central North Dakota. *Four Souls* begins as Fleur embarks on a journey to avenge herself upon the man who bought and clearcut her family's allotment at the end of *Tracks*. Fleur traces the man—a lumber baron named John James Mauser—to Minneapolis, and insinuates herself into his household with the intent of killing him quietly in his sleep. Yet her plan is foiled when she finds Mauser crippled by an unknown illness. Witnessing his misery and the incompetence of his medical advisers, she reasons that killing him may be more an act of mercy than punishment, and so resolves to cure him before carrying out her revenge. Fleur rehabilitates and eventually marries Mauser, but keeps delaying his death because she is dazzled by his ardent devotion and decadent lifestyle. One narrator muses retrospectively that after she “had returned his body to him” Fleur became “accustomed to her power” over Mauser (73), a dynamic that is swiftly reversed when the two conceive a child. Fleur's latent tuberculosis infection has left her prone to dangerous miscarriages, and given the distance she has traveled from friends and family to enact her revenge, she has little choice but to stay in Mauser's household and carry the child to term.

⁹⁷ *Four Souls* 52.

Her situation becomes even more precarious when whiskey is prescribed as both a tocolytic to halt Fleur's premature contractions and as a preventative tonic judiciously dispensed for the duration of her pregnancy. Fleur does carry her child safely to term, but becomes addicted to alcohol as a result, and Mauser is delivered back to health and happiness only to watch his wife succumb to addiction and his only child slip into longer and longer autistic absences. As his businesses also begin to fail, Mauser slides into a deep depression, wondering if "when Fleur cured him...was that a piece of good fortune or was it the beginning of a subterranean justice that now started, one catastrophe and then the next, to bring him down?" (92). For both Fleur and Mauser, the cure for what ails them quickly becomes a curse.

These rapid reversals between health and sickness, impunity and punishment, power and dependency beg the question whether or not either character had ever been cured in the first place. Rather, each appears to suffer the effects of dormant illness: Fleur's latent infection is what makes her prone to recurrent miscarriages; just as Mauser's physicians believe his mysterious prior illness to be the cause of their son's developmental difficulties. These tropes of carrying—either a latent bacterium, dormant virus, or even a fetus—serve to undermine Fleur's and Mauser's autonomy, rendering their bodies mysterious and potentially dangerous saboteurs wreaking havoc on their carefully laid plans. Significantly, secondary social diseases fetter both characters despite the strong affective ties they enjoy with loved ones and their degree of integration into a larger community. *Four Souls*, like *Tracks* before it, takes pains to warn its readers that acts of healing are imperfect, temporary, and even potentially dangerous to the medical practitioner. Healing and revenge are antithetical tasks—for as the above quote suggests, to heal is to take on another's pain and to bring it forth from your own body, and revenge projects one individual's pain onto another person's body.

By rendering her most charismatic characters as also the most sickly, Erdrich's text continues a theme explored in *Tracks*, which is that health and power are only ever temporary

states, not inalienable possessions. In that narrative, sickness spurs adaptation, adoption, and collaboration, which ensures cultural survival even in the absence of Fleur, the most powerful practitioner of traditional medicine and representative of culturally nationalist leadership within the Anishinaabe community. Fleur's abandonment of the Anishinaabe in order to win back her land is portrayed as a dereliction of her duty as both a leader and a mother. In *Four Souls*, this critique of nationalist leadership grows more pointed, and tropes of pathology are also used to slightly different effect. Here the nationalist figure is further humbled and humiliated as her quest to regain the land that was stolen is hindered by chronic and social diseases. Yet Fleur's difficulties are due, not to the original tuberculosis epidemic, but rather to a reckless act: Fleur's assumption of her mother's name, Four Souls.

This explanation occurs before the reader is acquainted with Fleur's pregnancy and prior miscarriages.

When Fleur took the name Four Souls she thought she was taking a name that would build her up, protect her, and it was true, the original Four Souls was a powerful woman. What Fleur didn't know was the name would take over and have more of an effect upon her than she could have conceived. For the name was something else—it was forceful, it was old, and it had its own intentions.... The name was going to do what it wanted with Fleur. From the beginning, she did not own it. Once she took it up, the name owned her. It would slam her to the earth and raise her up, it would divide her, it would make her an idiot and nearly kill her, and it would heal her once it had finished humbling her. (46-7)

This passage is notable for how the transition from the cluster of positively-charged absolutes like truth, originality and power in the first line to images of contradiction and division at its conclusion hinge upon a conditional act of conception. Not only does the verb presage the new life that will soon form, but it also subtly indicates that Fleur was carrying another, heavier metaphysical burden even before she even entered Mauser's home. Moreover, this conception builds upon and complicates the earlier sense of taking Fleur initially uses to describe her relationship to the name. That act, as the narrator tells us, was meant to empower, to use the name as a vehicle to confer the mother's strength onto the daughter. But to conceive is trickier

than to take—coming from the Old Latin *concupere*, its root *capere*, to take, is modified by the prefix *con*—meaning that Fleur’s first sense of taking the name for herself is almost immediately transformed into a joint act, a taking together.⁹⁸ Following this conception Fleur’s intentions are complicated and contradicted by the name she consorts with, as the reader is enjoined to recognize the agency and power of the name itself in sentences simpler and more forceful than the foregoing. This subtle and elegant passage serves to powerfully disrupt the possessive and instrumental approach that underlies Fleur’s nationalist sense of identity.

By subjecting Fleur to a bruising process of breaking and reformation, and divesting her of her ownership over her mother’s name, this passage foreshadows the arc of Fleur’s own journey in the novel: from power, isolation, and possession through a complex cohabitation, pathology, and powerlessness and into a final reconciliation when she returns home. She regains her land eventually, but this alone does not cure her. Rather, she is healed when a new name is given to her. It is not written or uttered, but the readers are told that this is part of a larger pattern of change and becoming through which the Anishinaabe endure as a people. Through the tribulations of Fleur, Erdrich powerfully suggests that the (post)nationalist project is rooted in an unhealthy notion of possession and misguided forms of identification and affiliation. By posing contingency and communal endurance as the alternative Erdrich’s novel performs a subtle critique of (post)nationalist identity politics in a manner similar to the Colson Whitehead novels examined in chapter two.

The task of this chapter will be to identify how *Four Souls* and the novel that followed it, *The Plague of Doves* (2008), connect somatic disease to social ailments in order to suggest that certain acts of identification, not identities themselves, are where the trouble lies. By portraying acts of possession, recognition, and remembrance in tandem with disease, Erdrich’s novels offer

⁹⁸ "conceive, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/38089.

a nuanced critique of political paradigms that place a premium on proscriptive forms of indigeneity. Tropes of pathology in these two novels defame rigid identity politics and posit a more labile, relational approach to communal belonging in their stead. In so doing, Erdrich intervenes definitively in contemporary debates surrounding Native American cultural production and sovereignty, suggesting that the latter is served best not by definitive (time)lines but by an ethos of dynamic relationality and mutual dependency.

I. Context(ualization): American Indian Literary Nationalism and Kinship Criticism

Erdrich's insistence that nationalist forms of identification and belonging were harmful to tribal communities put her directly into opposition with American Indian literary Nationalism, in which history is a placeholder used, not to seek answers, but to affirm a long-denied history of loss and oppression. Though bringing this history to light is crucial, acknowledgement alone is not enough to combat the ongoing effects of racism, particularly the manner in which soft disempowerment is exacerbating and accelerating cultural appropriation today. To "truly engage in challenging historical work," as literary nationalist critic Craig Womack enjoins us to, we must honor his call to "prioritize dates, events—in short history" and expand it to include the rigorous analysis and interpretation of causes, effects, motive and meaning.⁹⁹ The nationalist stance becomes problematic when it deploys the past solely as a referent meant to demonstrate racial oppression writ large. This approach, known as "historicism," treats past events as monoliths that contain a fixed definition. I contend that a truly engaged historical criticism must move beyond this to adopt a diachronic approach to analyze the twinned histories of colonial oppression and native survivance as they evolved and shifted through time.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Craig Womack "The Integrity of American Indian Claims," 171.

¹⁰⁰ My definitions of historicism and historicity have been adapted from Frederic Jameson's use of the terms in his *Postmodernism*, where he describes how these practices of bracketing the past and treating it in a superficial, symbolic way (historicism) has engendered a crisis within contemporary society that is becoming less and less able to deal with the

The key problem with historicism is that it generates reified and rigid conceptions of indigenous identities similar to the ones generated by the multicultural misappropriations discussed earlier. In both scenarios the historical fact of adversity serves as a means to explain some inborn or inherent quality of the Native American community. For example, we can see this unfolding within Womack's treatise. Fifth of the ten tenets that guide literary nationalists and their allies is that

We cannot walk away from those things that are killing us in Native communities. **We all know** the statistics: shorter lives, higher unemployment, younger suicides, and a host of other depressing realities. **It should be obvious** by now that casinos, essential as they might be as economic resources, are not going to save us; thinking must save us, and this is where critics come in... **We know** the foundation of the crisis is loss of land, and the possibility of turning around these statistics is only available through its return... (170, emphasis mine)

As he describes the crisis facing Indian Country, Womack repeatedly invokes the collective plural pronoun to describe a community of nationalists who are intimately acquainted with the myriad facets of the crisis. Most intriguing is how the collective is imbricated with a shared sense of knowing that renders both these problems and the solution self-evident. In this light, what's most urgent is to gather the collective will to face these issues and adopt the right kind of thinking about them, which demands both creativity as well as a rigorous pragmatism. But what is lost in Womack's description of the type of thinking that will subvert this crisis is an examination of the crisis itself. Are the statistics the same in 2006 as they were a decade earlier after the implementation of Indian Gaming Act, or in 1988, when the tribes were granted concessions that made the implementation of the Self-Determination act feasible for the first time?¹⁰¹ Womack calls repeatedly for others to historicize, but rarely does so himself.

complexity of the past and its relationship to the present (historicity). My sense of historicism extends beyond the stylized images of past movements, eras, genres (which is Jameson's primary concern) to include any broadly reductionist treatment of the past.

¹⁰¹ For more, on the dramatic statistics that demonstrate the positive impact of gaming, see Cornell and Kalt's working paper "American Indian Self-Determination: The Political Economy of a Successful Policy."

As indigenous scholar Daniel Heath Justice warns, passages like the above reveal a disquieting echo of colonialism logic at the heart of postnationalist identity politics. That is, when intellectuals like Cook-Lynn and Womack claim literary texts and historical events hold self-evident truths, they assume that critical objects “have a uniform meaning among all readers” and misconstrues such aesthetic objects as “social force[s] that can enhance our sovereignty ...without ever really grappling with all the difficulties of those assertions” (154). This facile simplification of cultural production as conveying a uniform political meaning is a highly problematic intellectual gambit in Justice’s estimation, because it allows colonial values to persist beneath calls for tribal sovereignty. The wolf goes in sheep’s clothing, in other words, when sovereignty shifts from a tool designed to enhance indigenous empowerment to one used to suppress dissent. Literary nationalists need to slow down and examine whether or not they are perpetuating binary relationships of subordination and determinism or more reflective, contingent ones based in “kinship” models of reciprocity. The more illuminating critical move to make, Justice argues, comes when

We advocate the contextualized principles of sovereignty and tradition without assuming that political independence or appeals to a context-specific tradition alone will be the cure-all for Native empowerment, or that empowerment without ethical consideration or reflection is inevitably a good thing. Those kinds of certainty are comforting in the short term—and for those who desire power over others—but they are ultimately ineffective in revealing truth, giving respectful voice to experience, or pushing us to face the big challenges facing indigenous peoples today. (154)

An ethics of uncertainty has a vital role to play in evenly distributing power because it pluralizes forms of cultural and political belonging. After all, “it is as *peoples* that we endure, though our obligations to kinship and balanced relationships” (159). The pluralist critical approach that arises here is focused on the principles of reflection, reciprocity, and mutual dependency that underlay indigenous identities—not the examination and delineation of tribal identities. This

emphasis on relationality is what differentiates newer, pluralist Native American criticism from the postnationalist critiques and cosmopolitan ones.

A further clue to the distinction between postnationalism and pluralism lay within the tension between the two different uses of “context” in the above quote. For literary postnationalists, context connotes a series of significant dates and events, and signals a specific history of cultural cohesion, resistance, and survival that serve as the primary justification for tribal self-rule and self-determination. But pluralists contend that the form of indigenous belonging that emerges from this model is inflexible and works against the fight for sovereignty. Once culture becomes the only tool in the fight against colonialism, its sacrosanct status silences debate and discussion about the changing nature of the beliefs, values, and practices that comprise culture. This leads to infighting and self-policing, and denies band members the ability to adapt and modify cultural practices in response to changing pressures and innovations outside. These conditions silence dissent in ways that reinstate oppressive power structures and foster relations of domination, separation, and control.

Kinship or pluralist critics like Justice, however, tend to speak in terms of “contextualization,” of context as a web of interwoven causes and effects that reveal a multivalent field of adaptation and mutual transformation amongst many different actors. This complex concatenation does not lead to assimilation or sameness, but allows different communities to evolve in response to their peers, in parallel tracks that neither diverge nor converge. Pluralists see this openness to change, debate, and engagement as strengthening democratic political processes and justifying indigenous calls for self-governance. The case for self-governance is shaky when it is built upon identity or status alone. It is made stronger when it is based in specific practices of contingency, inclusion, and engagement that typify indigenous communal politics. In emphasizing acts of community building and affiliation over the historical

facts, pluralists emphasize how history is used to by marginalized groups to advocate for their political rights.

Intriguingly, Erdrich's recent novels have anticipated this ethical call to contingency and a renewed focus on relationality to identify and combat latent social ills in her twelfth novel, *The Plague of Doves* (2008). Considering a string of gruesome murders and vengeful reprisals in the rural North Dakota town called Pluto in 1911, the novel moves non-chronologically through the lives of the victims, perpetrators, and their descendants to reveal the complex web of complicity, resistance, malice, desire, and ignorance that binds Native and white communities together. In an interview she gave shortly after *Doves* was released, Erdrich states that she wanted to tell a story "that shows the influence of history on the passions and decisions of people who live in the present." The novel accomplishes this by moving constantly back and forth between the present timelines in the novel, which span from 1963 through the mid-1970s, and the events that reflect an intense period of Indian and white conflict during the settlement of the town and the loss of reservation lands, from the 1870s through the lynching of four innocent Anishinaabe in 1911. According to Erdrich, this emphasis on the transgressions of temporal and spatial boundaries is meant to resonate with and loosen the "hopeless grip that nationalism has upon so many of our countries and has upon so many of us. It all does come to nothing in the end, and that's the truth of history."¹⁰²

In this light, Erdrich is displacing nationalist nostalgia and historicism with an emphasis on a more diachronic, contextualized sense of history and identity. Scholar Kenneth Roemer concurs, and argues that Erdrich's concerted effort to break down temporal boundaries represents the "human urges that transcend specific concepts of indigenous" identity politics "and to dramatize complex problems specific to Native American culture" (124). He concludes that Erdrich's blending of references to Métis, immigrant, and Anishinaabe cultures in her narrative

¹⁰² "The Plague of Doves, Multigenerational Murder Mystery," interview on *Weekend Edition*.

“undercut[s] one-dimensional notions of Native history and contemporary Native reality” by revealing the pluralist, transnational character of indigenous forms of belonging (131).¹⁰³ Another critic, Susan Strehle, argues the inverse, stating that in *Doves* history shapes national identity. On her account, the novel’s narrative discontinuity is meant to mimic and illuminate the erasure of indigenous histories that takes place in the mythology or “dreams” of manifest destiny. Erdrich’s prose “highlights the political nature of forgetting that is required by American exceptionalism” (124) by showing how communal alienation and disenfranchisement of indigenous characters correlates directly to their internalization of Eurocentric mythologies. It is only in moments of rediscovering artifacts from the tribal past that counter these dominant narratives that *Doves*’ narrators become aware of their constraints and are freed “to pursue other, better dreams” (119) that are, presumably, those of political parity and tribal nationhood. But although she claims that this engenders a greater degree of critical awareness and reflection in both Native and non-Native readers, Strehle’s account is scant on the details of what these decolonialized forms of indigenous belonging would look like. In both accounts, an abridged sense of history harms the indigenous community, which at the very least denies the community an acknowledgement of their rich, pluralist cultural heritage, or at worst, curtails their quest for cultural and political sovereignty.

Yet Erdrich’s depiction of a difficult and painful past does much more than either reflect or predict tribal disenfranchisement. This is because the novel examines the destructive events and circumstances surrounding the settlement of Pluto through the richly varied personal family history of its primary narrator, a young mixedblood college student named Evelina Harp. Steeped in tales of loss and violence as well as incredible romantic travails, Evelina is proud of her extended family’s “historical reputation for deathless romantic encounters” because it provides “a

¹⁰³ Yet aside from hinting that this transnationalism exceeds nationalism’s overly rigid approach to difference as well as cosmopolitanism’s relativist one, it’s unclear what Roemer’s analysis contributes to our understanding of the ongoing “controversies about tribal nationalism and transnationalism” Roemer mentions at the outset of his essay (115). Instead, he ends on an anodyne note, by stating that Erdrich’s transnationalism spurs greater historical and critical reflection in her readers.

current of drama that holds together the generations” (8, 9) of community members living both on the reservation and the neighboring town of Pluto. The ambivalent result is a community “rife with conflicting passions. We can’t seem to keep our hands off one another, it is true, and every attempt to foil our lusts through laws and religious dictums seems bound instead to excite transgression” (116). This series of amorous adventures that unfolds between four generations of white, Anishinaabe, immigrant, and Métis characters in the novel works to counterbalance the racial tensions and resentments that would otherwise tear the community apart. This is not to say that history wears two faces in Erdrich’s narratives—one of comedy and one of tragedy—for there are elements of farce and calamity in both sets of events. Rather, the sense of history that emerges here is of something that becomes deeply ingrained and hidden. Passions are all but obscured by “the modesty of the subsequent marriages and occupations of my relatives” (9), only to flare up in rare moments of pique, just as sorrows “becomes lodged inside of them forever...a thing that each covered up according to their nature” (84). According to critic David Stirrup, Erdrich’s later novels frequently begin in destructive moments of encounter with Euroamericans before they shift to dwell extensively on native survivance in the aftermath of that collision, showing how Euroamerican and Anishinaabe cultures are modified by the contact. Erdrich’s historicity “readdress[es] the processes of colonial inscription, geographical delimitation, and psychic—imaginative—containment” in a manner that “speaks boldly to those political histories of Native-European relations” (12). Erdrich’s sense of historicity is of an event that is absorbed, mutated, and affectively inscribed into her characters, overriding racist and colonial separations that had sparked the moment of encounter in the first place.

Stirrup further notes how Erdrich’s historicity is aligned with healing in her later novels. The event or encounter is characterized by severance and rupture, a *daashkikaa* or “cracking apart” that opens up a “potentially transformative space” where the work of mending, reinvention, and healing takes place (10-11). This healing is not a simple reinstatement of what

was, or an imprimatur of indigenous values over Euroamerican ones, but rather a reassertion of indigenous forms of relationality and mutual dependency. Linking healing to a process of “re-membering the moment of encounter and its subsequent plurality” (19). Stirrup’s work is a fine mediation and expansion of Justice’s fantastic and nuanced revision of the American Indian Literary Nationalist movement around values of relationality and contingency. However, his treatment of healing historicity is oddly limited to metaphorical instances of the curative in texts that evince a predominance of actual pathology. In *Four Souls*, as mentioned earlier, a mysterious illness thwarts the nationalist quest for revenge and forges greater contact and understanding between two enemies, and in *The Plague Doves*, the communal gathering to oust an invasion of the titular creatures inspires the grand romance of Evelina’s mixedblood grandmother and her Métis grandfather, bringing them into close companionship with white and immigrant communities as they begin their life together. I argue that the emphasis on pathology in these two texts is meant to alert the reader to the presence of nostalgic historicism and to replace it with a more relational sense of historicity and indigenous forms of belonging.

In both novels, historicity tells the narrative of how disease prompts moments of “cracking apart” that lead to transgression, mutation, and reformation within indigenous communities and identities. Consider a moment from *Four Souls*, in which Nanapush has just finished describing how Fleur came to spare Mauser’s life on the night she’d intended to take it. He postulates that she deviated from her original plan because she was under the influence of the name Four Souls, which she had taken for protection at the outset of her quest. The name Four Souls, he explains, had originally belonged to Fleur’s mother, but

From the beginning, [Fleur] did not own it. Once she took it, the name owned her. It would slam her to the earth and raise her up, it would divide her, it would make her an idiot and nearly kill her, and it would heal her once it had finished humbling her... When she took Four Souls as a name, she brought down on herself not only the great strength, but the sorrow and the complexity of the woman who came before. (47)

Here identities are depicted as portable and dangerous agents, shaped by the lived experiences of their hosts. Fleur had wrongly supposed that the name was an instrumental thing, a talisman to augment her existing skills as she pursued her plan. Yet, as Nanapush explains “the story fills in deeper, where you see through the past so you understand what made Fleur and the name she took too powerful to contain” (48). The context given to the name reveals its power to trouble neat binaries of past and present, instrument and agent—and, most importantly—that of control and submission.

Nanapush discloses the origin of Four Souls by first relating the events that led to the naming of her mother, a healer named Under the Ground who came into her power after a devastating epidemic swept through her community in the late nineteenth century.

In the time before the time the last treaty came about, there was a great healing that took place in the camp of Under the Ground. It made us weep, it made us sorry, it made us wonder who we are. It made confusion between the dead and the living, this world and the other alongside our ordinary life...Supposing one new sickness after another came and racked deep, so that young men and women threw themselves on stones to break their limbs in the crush of their own fever. Suppose this happened in your own life, what then, would you not think of surrendering to the cross, of leading yourself into the hands of new medicines? Some did, many did, for a time I was one even once. But I came back from the Jesuits with a pair of eyeglasses, six books, a watch, and the old gods still strong in my heart. (48-9)

In this passage, we learn that healing is a terrifying act, one that creates great upheaval as it blurs many established religious, racial, and metaphysical boundaries. In the wake of the epidemic Under the Ground and Nanapush both go in search of special help, new medicines—and emerge stronger because of it. Yet this is not because they assimilate Euroamerican values or create some synthesis blending Anishinaabe and western practices. Rather, it encourages a pluralist stance, allowing each to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously. This plural perspective is used by each to help their community adapt to a set of challenging circumstances. Under the Ground got her name and her healing power because, after the epidemic Nanapush remembers, she had herself buried for four days and four nights, which allowed her to commune with powerful

manitous who gave her access to new medicine techniques. Years later, Under the Ground taps her relationship with these forces to heal her daughter in a new, wild ritual where she slashes her own arms deeply, four times, to separate her daughter's body from her soul and thereby trick death. Under the Ground throws that soul outside to wander and gather information, meanwhile leaving her daughter's body to rest and heal. When the girl recovered, her soul rejoined her, bringing with it all the knowledge it had gathered on its travels, and from then on the daughter's name was Four Souls. It is therefore a name that gains its power from its ability to stretch the bond between soul and body, to send the spirit on another sort of journey to keep it from traveling the one-way journey on the road to the west, into death.

The Four Souls origin story is used to suggest the possibility of non-commensurability between body and soul, the concrete and the virtual, experience and identity. Rather than the latter term determining the former, each seems to evolve and grow through periods of separation, and gain in power and wisdom when reunited. Taken together, these two passages suggest that power comes from pathology—not because disease has the capacity to enfeeble populations—but because it generates a heightened awareness of relationality and mutual dependency. Yet the virtues of contact that are extolled in the history of the name Four Souls is the opposite of control Fleur hopes to gain when she adopts it, and instead of being empowered she is humbled by it.

Fever is also the mechanism whereby control gives way to a more positive model of relationality in *The Plague of Doves*, through a re-imagining of the town of Pluto's founding given by Evelina's uncle and tribal judge, Antone Coutts. Judge Coutts is the grandson of Joseph J. Coutts, a white schoolteacher "who was part of the first, failed, town-site expedition, the youngest of a bunch of greedy fools, or venture capitalists, who nearly starved dead but eventually became some of the first people to profit financially from this part of the world" (94). Young Joseph is spurred on his quest by the prospect of the millions to be made in land speculation and the words of stoic philosopher and Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius: to "come

to his own aid, if he cared for himself and while it was in his power.”¹⁰⁴ The novel represents the stoic creed and quest for mental purity and absolute self-control as a form of illness, however: the men are gravely afflicted with “town fever” (97), all exhibiting “greed, its main symptom” (115) as they set out in the dead of the North Dakotan winter to beat another land surveying crew. Beset by blizzards at first, then flash flooding and starvation, it is Joseph’s inordinate or impure attachment to a material object that saves the group: he rushes back to camp to save his copy of *Meditations* from the rising waters, where he finds and kills an otter that sustains the men until more food arrives and they can complete their mission. Upon his return to civilization, Joseph continues to be “sick in a general way” as he slowly convalesces (112), he muses on his former companions and the improbable string of events that led them home. Finally, Joseph presses a crucifix one of his companions had given to him to his forehead “as if to absorb its meaning” (113). Feeling this futility of this act of epistemic appropriation, he declares himself “cured of town fever” and decides to become a lawyer. Antone tells us that after Joseph marries an Anishinaabe woman he will become the first lawyer in the town that grew from the land he surveyed, Pluto, and also the first white lawyer to defend the neighboring tribe’s sovereignty in court.

Joseph’s cure, which replaces his desire to delineate and control the landscape with a vocation spent in the defense of the downtrodden, warrants closer attention. It hinges peculiarly on his inability to absorb or appropriate a singular meaning from the crucifix, or from the stoic suffering endured, and the transcendence promised, by its most famous victim. With the deliberations outlined above, Joseph breaks decidedly with the advice of Marcus Aurelius, who is quoted at length just before Joseph comes to his revelation, in a passage that urges his readers to

¹⁰⁴ qtd. in Erdrich 98. It is interesting to note how Stoics regarded the body as the instrument of the mind, and held that absolute control over one’s mind was the object of philosophy. As Aurelius wrote earlier in *Meditations*: “In the mind of one who is chastened and purified thou wilt find no corrupt matter, nor impurity, nor any sore skinned over...there is in him nothing servile, nor affected, nor too closely bound [to other things], nor yet detached [from other things], nothing worthy of blame, nothing that seeks a hiding place” (209, brackets original).

carpe diem. The words from *Meditations* that immediately follow the quote continue in that vein, warning readers that contemplation spent on the outer world, especially the lives of others, is time wasted, which “makes us wander away from the observation of our ruling power.” The reader’s time is best spent in self-cultivation and achieving freedom from sensations and other attachments in this world, “wherein thou wilt cease to be held by pains and pleasure, and to be a slave to the vessel” of the body, “which is earth and corruption” (Aurelius 206). Yet Joseph continues to be troubled by the new kinship he feels with the material world, and he is especially “unnerved by the great emotion he’d felt” after killing the otter (109), whose preternatural eyes and sentience have convinced Joseph that “the meaning of the otter” will somehow unlock “the mystery of his survival” (113). He traces this sense of kinship with that creature to his admiration for the group’s two Métis guides, Henri and Lafayette Peace, thinking on the evening when the latter gave Joseph his crucifix. In particular, it is their devotion—not to a catholic god—but to the land and all of its inhabitants that Joseph admires most. Time and time again the guides’ deft reading of the weather and game signs around them saved the surveyors’ lives. When he realizes that it is not the transcendent idea of God that saved them but rather the brothers’ attunement to the nuanced changes in to the world around them, Joseph also concludes that this relationality and habits of receptivity cannot be “absorbed” but that they must be lived. In taking up the study of the law, Joseph chooses the mysteries of hermeneutics over the apodictic, the rational, and self-empowerment.

Here historicity leads to a relationality that overcomes colonial ideologies of division and appropriation, and triggers a similar shift in the tale’s narrator, Antone Coutts. After recounting his grandfather’s misadventures for the reader, Antone likens himself to infamous satirist Robert Burton’s proverbial plaintiff, saying “there I was, here I am, the clichéd mixed-blood with a wolf

by the ear” (114).¹⁰⁵ Slipping between distal and proximate and past and present, Antone is licensed to expound on his earlier sense of history as a conscriptive force and its relationship to justice.¹⁰⁶ Following his grandfather’s story, he muses that perhaps all “desperate enterprises that involve boundaries we place upon the earth” are doomed, and that the only things with staying power are those bolstered by an intimate “knowledge of the land and its relationship to dreams...that’s why as a tribe we exist to the present” (115). In these few lines, the mixed-blood magistrate contrasts mastery with knowledge and division with dreaming—juxtaposing states with processes—to firmly align tribal survivance with a renewed investment in the present moment.

This temporal, processural strategy for resisting reified and reifying histories is further association with uncertainty and risk when Antone then engages in a bit of proverbial play. Before he delves once more into the complicated legal imbroglios that continuously entangle the lives of tribal members and town residents, he conflates Burton’s anecdote with another from one of his contemporaries. Rather than echoing the melancholy scholar’s suggestion that the law merely substitutes immediate hazard for another, equally consummate (but slower) suffering, Coutts modifies it with Francis Bacon’s avowal that “it was only due to Justice that man can be a God to man and not a wolf” (117). In light of this transformative potential, what can we make of the closing lines of Coutts’ interchapter—larded as it is between the story of his grandfather’s town fever and the tale of a banker so “desperate for containment or certainty” that he embezzled a fortune before being exposed by his hypochondriacal¹⁰⁷ wife? I argue that tropes of

¹⁰⁵ The original line from Burton reads: “So he that goes to the law, as the proverb is, holds a wolf by the ears, or, as a sheep in a storm runs for shelter to a briar, if he prosecute his cause he is consumed, if he surcease his suit he loseth all; what difference?”

¹⁰⁶ Before Antone relates his grandfather’s contraction of town fever, he describes a conversation he had about the lynching years ago: “Someone seized the moment to act on their own biases. That’s it. Or history. Sometimes it is history” (92).

¹⁰⁷ The banker’s wife, Neve Harp, is a diabetic who is characterized as an etiolated woman who had “always been a willing patient” (125) before she ferrets out her husband’s emotional and financial fraudulence. Oddly, it is her husband’s avowed pragmatism, and his desire to maintain the status quo, that led him to his life of crime.

pathological embodiment in the tales Coutts tells encourage him to question the earlier assumptions he had made about history as a heritable and unalterable and to adopt, instead, a more relational stance that is aligned with the work of contextualization that blurs the lines between town and reservation, settlers and tribe, past and present, wolf and man. Through Judge Coutts' narration, justice emerges as a transformative process that slowly undoes division and containment.¹⁰⁸

II. Kindred Nationalisms

Erdrich's strongest critique of historicism, however, comes in the story of Billy Peace, the great-grandnephew of the Métis guides who were figured in Coutts' tale. Billy's story is related to the reader by a new narrative voice, that of Billy's young white wife, Marn Wolde. In the mid-1960s she meets and falls in love with Billy, an incredibly charismatic traveling preacher, and she leaves her family farm near Pluto to help him grow his congregation and start a family. Billy is at his most seductive, Marn claims, when he is extolling the virtues of "subjection, the killing happiness of letting go" because we are all already completely understood, "pierced by the sight and the vision" of God (142). However disquieting this depiction of the self as completely subordinate intermediary is, when they return to Pluto years later, Billy's message takes yet another a disturbing turn, and he grows more controlling, acquisitive, and greedy. Not only does he physically expand by feasting on whole cakes, pans of dough, and pots of pasta, but he begins to financially grow as well. Billy convinces Marn's father to give Billy access to the family's bank accounts so that he can consolidate their financial resources under his name, and soon he transforms the Wolde farm into the base of operations for

¹⁰⁸ Susan Strehle's accounting of this moment differs substantially from my own. She reads the "unknown dreams" that plague the pursuit of justice as both the hidden history of American imperialist oppression as well as the stereotypes of the vanishing, tragic *indian* that made the myth of Manifest Destiny possible. Yet she does not account for how Judge Coutts begins to question historicism—which is linked to bias, instinct, and heritability elsewhere in his chapters—precisely through his exposure to unknown and explicitly tribal dreams in the passages she cite.

his new and expanding church. At this time Billy also imposes severe restrictions on his family and growing group of followers, by disallowing the use of given names or any recognition of former family relationships, instead rechristening the entire collective as the Kindred. This turns out to be the literal translation of Billy's original family name, as Peace was an inventive shortening of the French-Canadian derived Parentheau.

With this erasure of all prior familial attachments, Billy transitions from charismatic spiritualist into a more draconian *pater familias*. This shift towards controlling the forms of collective belonging corresponds to the transformation of the large Wolde family farm, which sits on land adjacent to the reservation, into the home of the kindred's church. Upon their arrival there, Marn is surprised when Billy declares that "This was reservation...and should be again. This was my family's land, Indian land. Will be again. He lays it all out flatly with a lack of emotion that disturbs me. Something's there. Something's underneath" (152). Aside from its uncharacteristic affectlessness, Billy's statement also strikes Marn as odd because he already has land on the neighboring reservation, but had never before expressed an interest in going back there. Critic Gina Valentino interprets this as the moment in which Billy begins his transition from benevolent "mixed-blood messiah of an embattled people ...who draws a new version of the Native American community together" to embody "a kind of charismatic leadership that is dangerous" (131-2). Specifically, Valentino argues that Billy's ministry reflects the hazards endemic "to any project of community-building that depends on this kind of charismatic, iconic and ultimately patriarchal form of leadership. Billy's example shows that the desire to engage in a project of repossessing the land that was once possessed and lost can literally lead to a kind of possession" (132). This can be seen as "Billy is possessed, literally" by a type of insatiable cannibalistic spirit known as a *wiindigoo* in Anishinaabe tales.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Billy's transformation into a *wiindigoo* begins with his declaration that the land will be Indian once more (152) and is characterized first by his enormous physical and sexual appetites as well as his increased strength, and energy (152-154). He

This critique of indigenous nationalism therefore links a singular obsession with regaining legal title over lost tribal lands to a desire to possess and control human and cultural capital as well—figured through Billy’s quest to transform the Wolde land into Parentheau land and to rename all of its inhabitants after himself. In this way, Erdrich suggests that nationalism can slide all too easily into a paternalistic ideology that misconstrues sovereignty as absolute control over its citizenry. This is best illustrated through the instrumentalization of the Kindred that takes place after they reclaim Wolde land. Billy begins to insist that his acolytes practice a strictly instrumental role as their act of faith: they must be purified each morning in meditation and nightly through confession to better channel the spirit, to behave “like receivers . . . biochemical machines, small receptors narrowing down the hugeness of spiritual intelligence” (159). This process of joining to channel the spirit does “not stretch the individual’s barriers, as you might expect” but rather links the Kindred together to form a collective mind that will help Billy gain access to more divine knowledge (159). The Kindred are punished if Billy perceives that there “is something incongruent, something in you, something blocking the channel,” a right he justifies by claiming that “Your lives are mine. I will do with you as spirit wills” (162). Most chillingly, one night he forcibly tattoos “the moving figure-eight sign of eternal life” and the Métis national flag,¹¹⁰ “into the inside of [Marn’s] thigh with a needle” as she weeps (171). Clearly, the repatriation of the land has sparked a dangerous transformation in Billy, one that is characterized by a quest for absolute control over his congregation’s physical and spiritual lives.

What’s interesting to note is how this instrumental role and uniform familial identity the Kindred adopt is articulated on other corporeal bodies, particularly through pathological forms of

next grows in supernatural might—surviving a direct lightning bolt, bringing rain to end a months-long drought (156)—as he does in cruelty, slapping and striking his acolytes to keep them awake at their all night prayers (162), physically tattooing Marn with the figure-8 symbol of the Métis nation on her thigh (173), doling out punishment known as ‘schedule’ where congregants are required to mortify their flesh in the room where they channel the spirit (175).

¹¹⁰ I am indebted to critic Kenneth Roemer for making the connection between the Métis National flag and the figure-eight symbol of infinity Marn is tattooed with (130).

embodiment in the novel. Billy's new religion is meticulously "named and organized [after he] discovered it" by his new legions of followers from the ranks "of the wounded, the ones with something missing, though they had to be organized at the same time" (158-9). Even those who cannot come join the Kindred in person support them from afar, calling in to donate after they listen to nightly broadcasts of Billy's sermons. As Marn notes, the Kindred are nightly inundated with "the messages of the converted," who call to share their stories as they give.

Each ring brought cash. Women called to say they'd . . . felt power boil up between their knuckles, understood another exquisite language that hovered in the air all around them. Women called to say . . . when changing diapers they had known the call. Or how, when baking cakes, the straw came out of the batter with a continuous musical tone that signified salvation . . . their hands hurt with the knowledge and their sex lives were numbing them, hurting them. They were dying of dyspepsia, of cancer, of deadly warts, of an unusual virus, of hives, of internal parasites, of cerebral palsy, of cancer, of cancer . . . Men wrote and called [when] their names went dead, all of a sudden no one remembered who they were. They did not remember their own names either . . . Men wrote dying . . . of a wasting virus, of the kiss of the tsetse flies, of food, of garden herbicides, of home-owner's accidents, of thrombosis, of clotted veins, of black depression, of cancer, of cancer. (168-9)

It's critical to note that this plethora of pathology in this passage is preceded by claims that the callers have received and understood *the* call to be saved. That is, they have at last recognized and deciphered an invisible code written in myriad ways on various objects around them, a code that reveals to them that they have been chosen for salvation. Yet this new, secret knowledge they have retrieved physically pains them, hurting the same knuckles it had "boiled up" through. But immediately after this admission another pain, arising from another source, is also revealed to be hurting the callers—making it difficult to determine if it is the knowledge that they have been chosen or the litany of corporeal ailments that is truly paining them. Most significantly, after a long list of acute and chronic diseases, the second group of callers reach out when they lose their names, seeking to stabilize selves that waver and blur like heat waves rising off asphalt. These logorrheic acts of testifying, witnessing, and confessing are all meant to derive meaning and purpose from that pain, to read it as part of a larger narrative arc that culminates in a grander

future for the spirit—in which the recognition of a singular, transcendent truth hidden in these frail ephemeral forms precipitates the callers’ divestment from their material possessions. In this passage we work backwards to see that the Kindred’s formation as a singular familial unit forged out of one message of salvation is predicated on a diverse and baffling array of illnesses that prompted identity crises. Yet Billy’s message of salvation is clearly not helping his communicants, whose diseases are enumerated alarmingly as the caveats to their tales of recognition and knowledge.

Marn offers a different salve for pain, one that does not require the supplicant to respond and replicate Marn’s message or interpretation of events, but that creates a sharing of both personalities and sensations. She calls these her “pictures” and describes them as entering into a state in which the healer and the patient are psychically and physically “locked in, twisted close, braided, [and] born” (161). Once bonded she intensifies a set of sensory details that are supplied by either herself or her partner, to the extent that virtual image can seem quite real. “Nothing flows from me” but instead she is “filled with the rushing dark of what [the other] suffers,” thereby alleviating another’s pain (146). This depiction of healing as a sharing of pain, though it may not correspond with Euroamerican notions of the curative, does model Anishinaabe forms of healing given by Nanapush throughout *Four Souls*.¹¹¹ Marn’s gift for merging with the sick wanes as Billy’s ability to elicit their confessions, loyalty, and cash grows stronger—she begins to lose her pictures when they are first married, and they seem entirely gone once the Kindred takes over the farm.

What allows her to regain her pictures for herself is the handling poisonous snakes, who send “a blood tide of power through” her and for whom she can generate heat through her “pictures . . . of the flat rocks, the black rocks, the steady beating of the sun” (160). When her pet

¹¹¹ This is evinced in Nanapush’s description of Under the Ground’s healing gifts: “You heal by taking the pain of others, by going down to argue with death itself, by swallowing the sharp bone and vomiting the sickness out in your own blood” (52).

copperhead snake strikes her, Marn lets “the sickness boil up . . . I let the knowing take hold of me . . . When the life flowed back in I knew I was stronger. I knew that I’d absorbed the poison.” In this moment, Marn pivots from being a channel through which Billy can refine and absorb spiritual knowledge to adopting a more immanent understanding of the sacred: “As it worked in me, I knew that I *was* the poison and I was the power” (162, emphasis original). This atemporal moment of awakening frees Marn from the transcendent and instrumental forms of belonging proselytized by Billy. This new knowledge is characterized as corporeal, as sinking into her bones “like something viral” and painful (163). Yet though dolorous, this knowledge is not similar to the pain she was commanded to suffer as a sieve for the sacred—rather, it is characterized by a different sort of “quiet pain”, “a sorrow out of mind” (or rather, out of time) when she realizes that, free of Billy’s visions and prophecies, her future is “impenetrable, a cloud pack, fog socked in” (164). Here tropes of illness and pain positively model contingent forms of belonging and knowledge that challenge transcendent yet equally painful forms of instrumental belonging.

After her awakening to this immanent sort of knowledge and power Marn becomes “a closed secret” (166), in stark contrast to volubility displayed by the chronically ill suffers among the Kindred. This is not to say that Marn has yet escaped the Kindred, and Billy, or fully shed her servility, but that her instrumental status is now alloyed with a sense of agential determination and self-direction. She becomes more ambivalent, “hopelessly awakened” (176), characterized by both sickness and strength, hunger and satiety, artifice as well as authenticity—impenetrable to Billy’s sight but also a figment in one of his dreams. Tropes of pathological transfiguration bloom in Marn and Billy’s final confrontation, when she resolves not to “let him go until I sank through his bones like a wasting disease. Ate him from the inside, devouring his futility, filling him with a beautiful craving.” Following these thoughts Marn murders him by injecting Billy with venom milked from her snakes, but she is not so much avenging herself on him as she is

killing his “bad twin” so “that he could hurt no one” else anymore (178). As she injects the venom directly into his heart, she “got the picture” of what happens next—how she will fake his suicide, stage his death as a suicide by self-strangulation, how his body will be cut down by shocked devotees, who will nevertheless continue as his Kindred—somewhere else, after Marn forces them off the farm (178-9). A viral femme fatale, Marn disrupts Billy’s brand of paternalistic nationalism with tropes of ambivalent embodiment and illness that destabilize the instrumentality he had forced on her and other members of the kindred—purchasing their freedom by eschewing his prophecies for an uncertain future.

Critic Deborah Madsen interprets this scene quite differently, claiming that when we read Marn’s narrative alongside Evelina’s, Marn is revealed as an unreliable narrator and the true *wiindigoo* who had been projecting her own appetites onto Billy all along. On Madsen’s reading, Marn has demonized Billy to justify her macabre reprisal of the same violent acts that her ancestors used when they displaced Billy’s ancestors a century prior. We later learn, for instance, that it was Marn’s schizophrenic great-uncle Warren who committed the murder for which the innocent indigenous men were blamed, and that of the four people who were hanged, one was Cuthbert Peace/Parenteau, Billy’s great-uncle. We also learn from Evelina that the four were hanged in a tree situated somewhere on the Wolde’s 888-acre farm, but her narrative also makes clear that Marn’s family did not condone the lynching, and that neither Marn’s great-grandfather nor her grandfather were involved in the events that lead to the wrongful accusation and murder of those men—and that some members of the white and immigrant community were opposed and had tried to stop the tragedy.

Finally, Madsen’s claim is dubious because authority and control become deeply ambiguous between Marn and Billy after her awakening. For instance, it’s unclear whether this final picture represents Marn’s plan or Billy’s fears, or some combination of the two, because in an earlier instance of sharing he dictates which pictures she projects. Given that Billy used

Marn's pictures as a form of escape and a means to relive happier moments from the past, and that he repeatedly urged her to "show me, show me" even after the memories take a turn towards the painful, one interpretation of this scene can be Marn giving him just that—showing him himself.¹¹² It's intriguing to note that as she shifts from healing to killing, the present tense narration that usually relates Marn's pictures shifts to the past tense typical of the rest of the novel. It's almost as if she were giving him back an amplified, lethal dose of the historicism and nostalgic recollections of home and family that fueled his perverted need to completely control and dictate the lives of his new Kindred. Lastly, Marn's motivations are also deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, she does not kill Billy in spirit of reprisal acting on false information, as the early lynching party killed his ancestor—she acts to free herself from her abuser. She quietly bides her time, searching out the right moment to act to save others, and especially her children, from Billy's "bad twin". But on the other hand, her calm demeanor veers into vengefulness as she seduces him into dropping his guard, deciding that she "hated him so much that I would not let him breathe . . . [u]ntil I ruled him so that he could hurt no one" (178). This instance of domination does not overrule other contradictory evidence, however, though it does make determining Marn's ultimate guilt or innocence impossible. Madsen's critique misses the point of Erdrich's novel: which is that ambivalence, contingency, and indeterminability are critical to undermining destructive forms of collective belonging.

Though the reader cannot avoid the bias inherent Marn's or any narrator's interpretation of events, Erdrich's penchant for arranging overlapping and contradictory accounts from limited

¹¹² In that earlier instance, Billy uses Marn's pictures to "escape" and relive happy memories from his childhood, demanding several times "show me" even after he supplies memories of abuse suffered through "burning welts, the scissors, pinched nerves, the dead eye, the strap" (161). This moment, as well as others from Antone's narrative, humanize Billy, portraying him as a victim of childhood abuse who went on to distinguish himself through combat in Korea before he returned home and began evangelizing. The reality is that both Marn and Billy are cast as richly complex and contradictory characters, "twinned" in that each is characterized by both light and darkness, weakness and strength, subordinate as well as dominant, hungry and satiated, loving as well as cruel to each other—in Marn's own tale and through those recounted by Antone and Evelina. Madsen's references to Marn's affiliation with snakes and Satan have more basis in Judeo-Christian theosophy than they does that of the Anishinaabe—as Erdrich has written of snakes in prior novels as powerful, but not evil, *manitous* affiliated with one of her most venerated heroines, Fleur Pillager.

narrative points of view is well known. In *Four Souls*, for instance, we are also treated to stories from Euroamerican as well as Anishinaabe narrators. Nanapush gives his account of Fleur's dealings with Mauser from an obvious distance, using facts he has gleaned from Fleur and suppositions he has constructed as he mulled them over with friends on long winter nights. Polly Elizabeth, Mauser's sister, gives her accounting from what she saw and experienced first-hand as a member of the household. Though the two accounts clash over many details, they represent equally valid forms of knowing. Literary critic Summer Harrison finds that this pluralization of perspectives is the bedrock of Erdrich's metafictional strategy. That is, by giving equal weight to contending alternative histories, Erdrich undermines the credibility of each. This is not meant to merely switch the reader's allegiance to the Anishinaabe account over the Euroamerican one, or vice versa—but to draw our attention to processes of legitimization to undermine any claim to epistemological mastery. Rather than reversing the binary between Western and Native cultural perspectives, Erdrich puts them into dialogue with each other, undermining any unqualified claims to absolute truth or knowledge and installing an ethos of relationality and mutual dependency in their stead.

III. Pluralist Temporalities

Marn's narrative therefore marks a crucial turning point in *The Plague of Doves*, in that it signals a definitive break with nationalist historicism and its transcendent identity politics and shifts instead towards forms of political and cultural production that are grounded in uncertainty and contingency. This is illuminated both by the positive figuration given to infectious states as disrupting rigid hierarchies as well as through the subtle shift Erdrich makes in her pagination and section breaks. In the first half of the novel, Erdrich's narrators use *fleur de lis*-shaped symbols to serve as sub-headers when recounting their own experiences in the recent past, but their words are punctuated by formally titled section breaks in chapters that involve the retelling

of events given by another source. In the first quarter of the novel, Evelina recounts her maternal family's "historical reputation for deathless encounters" in both the distant past and through her memories of her childhood. She begins with the tales her grandfather Mooshum told her about the eponymous plague of doves in 1896, and his early life with her grandmother, which are broken up by titled subheadings. The second and third chapters switch to her personal memories of her own budding romances at school and her observations of Mooshum's more sedate, contemporary adventures, and there the subheadings are *fleur de lis* symbols. Finally she relates how Mooshum came to tell her and her brother about the lynching in 1911, and the chapter is again divided with named section breaks. The same pattern expresses itself in the following section, in four chapters from Antone. The odd chapters give Antone's early courtship of Evelina's aunt (marked by *fleur de lis*) and are interspersed with stories handed down to Antone from his grandfather and one of his clients (which are separated by formally titled subheadings). In each case, personal narratives are structured by *fleur de lis* breaks, and second-hand recollections from a third party are divided by formally titled subheadings. Yet Marn's section deviates from this pattern in two ways. First, it only uses *fleur de lis* breaks because it focuses mostly on her own lived experience—for even when she has a picture and shares someone else's memories of other times or places, she fully inhabits them. But the second oddity is that her middle chapter is given almost entirely in the present tense, eschewing the preterite tense used in of all the preceding chapters.

What is pertinent to note here is that the present-tense chapter chronicles Billy's budding avarice, which signals his transformation into a *wiindigoo* and chronicles how Marn gradually lost faith in Billy, even before he began to demand physical mortification as a means of cultivating the sickly ranks of his Kindred. As she laments, "all this time, all this time, I don't speak in tongues or feel very much when I pray. I don't get my pictures back. All of that's gone" (154). If in her other chapters Marn's pictures represent her talent for merging herself and others,

then their absence here signals her need to differentiate and define herself on her own terms. Consequently, Marn does begin to see differently, and to challenge Billy's authority. Here this sense of separation, coupled with the sustained shift to present tense, serves to open a space within the center of her narrative and the novel itself, a space where uncertainty and speculation thrive and challenge historicism. After this her third and final chapter switches back to a past tense, but one interlarded with the subjunctive, blurring the categories of agency, health, and identity as Marn strives to free herself from Billy at any cost.

After this injection of present tense from Marn, none of the other narrators can resume their use of formal sub-headings to bracket and present the past the way they did before. In the sections narrated by Evelina and Antone directly after Marn's tale, each evinces a mixture of formal headers and *fleur de lis* to present their own experiences as well as the past, before abandoning them and switching to *fleur de lis* entirely. When this happens, Antone and Evelina also begin to incorporate the subjunctive tense into their narratives, and each has passages that notably shift from past tense into the present to describe moments of intersubjective uncertainty.¹¹³

Political theorist William Connolly's work may provide some useful tools for thinking through the relationship between subjective uncertainty, atemporality, and evolving images of

¹¹³ The final section of the novel, given in the voice of a new narrator, the doctor whom Antone loved for many years who is the sole survivor of the family whose murder triggered the lynching, is a striking example of this. Cordelia's tale begins in present tense, but switches to past when relating how she "became the repository of many untold stories people tell when they know there is no use in keeping secrets" as the president of the Pluto Historical Society (296). It is in her past tense narration that she admits of herself, in third person, that she was thought of as prejudiced against the Anishinaabe because she would not treat them, not because she dislikes them but because "she experienced an unsteady weakness in their presence. It seemed beyond her control...in [their] presence her feelings gripped her with the force of unquestionable fate" (298). This theme of surrendering to fate, and faith—when recounting the past and exclusively in the past tense—is a technique shared by all of the novel's narrators. Yet it is a resignation that is directly challenged by the present tense narration that follows and contradicts it. For instance, the certainty of Cordelia's life and the meaning she grants the past is immediately undermined by narrative switch back to present tense, as she wonders, if she is truly so content with her life, then "why, when I gather my family's [clothes] in my arms, do I catch my breath at the wild upsurge, as if a wind had lifted me?" and she is filled with unease and nameless emotions. Tropes of virality, sickness, and wounding follow in the wake of these vast uncertainties, bringing contact with the contagion, ushering in an awareness of—not a grand truth, but "many small, strange" ones (310). In this way Cordelia solves the mystery of who murdered her family—resolving at last not to accuse (the by then deceased) Warren officially but to "declare a town holiday to commemorate the year I saved the life of my family's murderer." Rather than amending *the* truth bound in the official town documents, she would rather publish the "many small, strange truths" she's uncovered and pieced together through time (311).

nationhood. In his work on political liberalism, Connolly has written extensively on the need to rethink the liberal image of the nation, which is both considered to be crucial in securing cultural and political sovereignty yet is also an imagined form of unity based in fantasies of ethno-racial unity.

As both imperative and lack the nation creates a reserve of cultural energy to be activated when things become difficult in any domain of life. Its absence is invoked, then, to explain the inefficacy of the state, or the insufficiency of moral life, or the troubles of the economy, or the need to discipline selective constituencies. (“The Liberal Image of the Nation” 184)

Rather than replacing the racialized sense of unity that lay within the concept of nationhood, liberals have been guilty of papering over race with other forms of belonging based in shared values or practices. The troublesome result is that they have retained the underlying logic of something inborn and uniform within national identity. At its worst, this ingrains a punitive impulse to discipline minorities who fall beyond the norm and, at best, fuels the drive to assimilate them. According to Connolly, we can surmount both these shortcomings by instead pluralizing the forms of belonging that bind us together. That is, when various collectivities promote lines of connection across difference, they are forced into negotiations over priorities, values, and how to distribute scarce resources to meet those needs. Thus a sense of cultural exchange is reinstalled at the center of the public sphere, generating a dense political life. By displacing the drive for essentialist identity politics with an ethos of engagement, mutual dependency, and exchange, Connolly believes that we can replace the “thin” liberal image of the democratic politics (188) with a thicker “network model of pluralism” (191). New, contingent, forms of collective belonging will form around a careful cultivation of diversity—which must begin and end with the acceptance of the contestability and mutability of one’s own personal value system. He hypothesizes that a “post-nationalist ethos of engagement” will emerge from “the moral exhaustion of nationalizing constituencies, shame over violent past, and a few propitious court decisions” (198).

To be clear, neither Connolly nor I are suggesting that a postnationalist ethos of engagement entails an abandonment of the quest for indigenous sovereignty and self-governance. Rather, it is a rhetorical move designed to jettison Euroamerican concepts of nationhood that are predicated on an inborn and uniform sense of identity that drastically oversimplify the type of reciprocal relationality that underlies existing Native American political institutions. As Daniel Justice and other prominent Native American Studies scholars have argued, indigenous concepts of sovereignty have never rested easily alongside Western formulations of it as the absolute power let live or kill.¹¹⁴ It is vital that the indigenous fight for greater sovereignty within the existing federalist structure of the United States expand and continue—because this is the most robust, most fully developed, challenge to thin liberalism in existence today.¹¹⁵

Recasting the concentric model of national identity as a more rhizomatic one will finally make it possible to revise the boundaries of liberal conceptions of the individual, which are predicated on capitalist and commodifying relationships to land and property. For changing the ethos of public life begins with what Connolly calls an “ethical artistry” in which an individual constantly works upon herself to question how received standards and social mores are reflected in her daily habits and routines, and how these may be shifted to respond to more relational models of mutual exchange and contestability (*Neuropolitics* 131-2). This entails both accepting the instability of our own personal identity and the right of others to question your belief and value systems. Such an active engagement with risk extends beyond the self and identity to encompass a confrontation of the broader “fragility of things” at the present moment. This latter

¹¹⁴ For more in this vein, see Connolly’s critique of Agamben, where he cites *Cherokee v. Georgia* to illustrate how, in democratic states, sovereignty circulates between an enunciative, final authority and its enactment—that is, between elected representatives, appointed officials, and the masses. He takes Agamben to task for hyperinflating the dangers of biopolitics at when what he is really analyzing is a nationalist identity politics. This misconception comes at the expense of a more thoroughgoing investigation of the influence of the relationships that develop between political constituencies (*Pluralism* 139-48).

¹¹⁵ As the research of Laura Evans, Erich Steinman, Cornell and Kalt, Polsby, and Strinchcombe demonstrates, the pluralization of political forms of engagement has been the single greatest influence on driving down economic inequality on reservations. Here is powerful support for Connolly’s theories that “pluralism’s project of reducing stark economic divides dovetails with the reduction of economic inequality” (*Pluralism* 8).

move is vital, as the capacity of both human and nonhuman collectives to meet the demands of a global neoliberal regime of production is increasingly diminished, only fueling and intensifying those demands and taxing human and environmental resources further. Yet this anxious state of affairs can lead either towards a doubling down on nationalist identity politics or towards increased experimentation with established roles, patterns of attachment, and forms of belonging. If we are to pursue the latter and eschew the former, a certain temporal strategy is required. That is, a more activist democratic pluralism will, first “*slow down and retune* ...demands for material ‘progress’ and second, institute strategies to *speed up* shifts in our orientations to self-identity, production and consumption processes, and the shaky space of humanity in the cosmos” (*Fragility* 136, emphasis original). Connolly thus calls for a thickening of the present moment as a means to instantiate a more pluralist ethos of exchange and mutuality at the center of our political life.

In *The Plague of Doves*, Evelina’s narrative best encapsulates how a thickened temporality may prompt role experimentation and overturn a pathological nationalist identity politics.¹¹⁶ The critical moment occurs when Evelina begins working as a nurse’s aid in a state mental hospital in the mid-1970s, when an impetuous kiss from patient named Nonette causes Evelina to be “completely charged with embarrassment. I burned and burned, losing control. I forced myself to rise, and even so stumbled, awkward and big to the door” (234). The kiss sets Evelina apart

from the many stories of reversal and romance among my aunts and uncles...A kiss from another girl had set me outside the narrative. None of the family stories could touch me. I was in [Anaïs Nin’s] story now. A dangerous love that could

¹¹⁶ Another fine, and more comic, example to consider comes from *Four Souls*, when Nanapush dons his wife Margaret’s medicine dress to give an impassioned speech before a tribal gathering to urge the Anishinaabe not to accept the land sale proposed by a faction within the tribal government. The dress, constructed entirely via traditional methods and materials, took months of hard work from both Margaret and Nanapush, and represents how a slowing down of capitalist modes of production inspires Nanapush to new rhetorical heights—speeding up his act of gendered role experimentation and prompting a fantastic speech regarding respect for all women, and especially mother earth, who ought not to be exploited and commodified any longer. The tribal members vote and side with Nanapush, rejecting the land deal and cementing his role as tribal chairman (155-57).

destroy. At the same time, I was so scared of what the kiss might actually lead to that I couldn't think of anything to do but eat. I stocked my little room with food...as long as I was eating I didn't have to figure out what I was doing, what Nonette was doing, and why I couldn't think of her and why I couldn't stop thinking of her.



After escorting a patient to the beauty parlor one late morning, I am returning alone through the steam tunnels underground when she is there... We're standing close and no one else is in the tunnel... After the first few moments, there's nothing frightening at all about kissing her or touching her. It is familiar, entirely familiar... I keep shaking, trembling, because our bodies are the same, and when I touch her I know what she is feeling just as she knows when touching me. [Afterwards] back on the ward, I begin to imagine how things really are. I invent her story. (235-36, section break original)

I've chosen this passage because it demonstrates how a shift between past and present tense immediately follows Evelina's concern that she is traducing her family's "historical reputation for deathless [and heteronormative] romantic encounters" (8), an identity she has actively cultivated for herself from a very young age. What's critical to note is that it is a loss of bodily control, counterbalanced with an insatiable desire to consume, that triggers this historical anxiety and accompanying shift in the temporal register. Strangely, the need to belong within her family's history—which is metaphorically aligned with touch in the past tense portion of the passage—becomes replaced by literal forms (and a liberal amount) of physical contact in the present. This shift from metaphorical belonging to physical contact is also accompanied by a subjective sense of merging and an imaginative blossoming, which works to supplement Evelina's stated lack of knowledge "about each patient's personal history" (237). Here the unwieldy body triggers the shift from a nationalist, paternalistic sense of history and into an intersubjective, thickened temporality.

This state of intersubjective blending and uncertainty—though exciting and generative at first—is a risky one. This is revealed when Evelina's fantasy, of Nonette leaving the sanatorium within the month and decamping to Paris with her, becomes patently unattainable. Nonette suddenly leaves the hospital one day, before her bipolar swings have been stabilized or she has

had a chance to adjust to the new dose of lithium. Nonette thinks she is well, but Evelina believes her to still be very ill, which triggers another startling revelation: “I am part of what she thinks is her illness, a symptom of which she thinks she has been cured” (240). This pathological see-saw, in which contact has dipped into contagion, causes Evelina to slip into a deep depression herself. So much so that she can no longer work and eventually admits herself for treatment. Evelina does so because she fears “losing my observer, the self that tells me what to do” and resolves to figure out “where I am in this life” by starting with “the beginning—my family” (241). She runs through the list of her immediate family members, listing their defining passions and goals, she thinks

of how history works itself out on the living. The Buckendorfs, the other Wildstrands, the Peace family, all of these people whose backgrounds tangled in the hanging....Now that some of us have mixed in the spring of our existence both guilt and victim, there is no unraveling the rope. (243)

The past here is expressed not as abstraction but as something that is lived, not a distant or neatly contained story but something that inhabits and influences Evelina. Recasting her identity involves reconfiguring her family’s history, moving it from the realm of something stable and received towards something that is inherited but then shaped and changed by its carriers.

The thickened sense of historicity that emerges here is expressed again as prompting a form of identity crisis when Corwin Peace—Evelina’s friend and Billy’s estranged nephew—comes to visit her. He brings a violin, but soon the lively jig Corwin plays changes, and

Something monstrous happens. All sounds merge for a moment in the belly of the violin and fill the room with distress. My throat fills up. I jump up. Alarm strikes through us. [Another patient] stops walking and backs up flat against the wall. But Corwin draws some note out of the chaos in his hands, and then draws it further up and up, further, until it is unbearable, and at that very point where it might become a shriek, the note changes key a fraction and breaks into the most lucid sweetness ...I don’t know how long it lasts. I don’t know when or if it actually ends...The playing of the violin is the only thing in the world and in that music is dark assurance. The music understands, and it will be there whether we stay in pain or gain in our sanity, which is also painful. I am small. I am whole. Nothing matters. (246)

This beautiful passage echoes the reversals that recur throughout Evelina's narrative, the movements between harmonious and rationally ordered phrases and harsh, almost unbearable noise in which all the notes merge together clamorously. Yet the noise and the music need each other, feed into and respond to each other in the back and forth Corwin weaves with the music. According to Connolly, this relationship between chaos or noise and order reveals the contingency at the heart of our notions of agency and identity. This creative play is one of mutual adjustment of each to the other, modes that are "neither simply assignable to player or coach, nor fitting neatly into extant notions of preformed intention, nor reducible to a reflexive dialectic, [but which] occur all the time in multiple domains. They form the essence of freedom" (75). This ethos of engagement and reciprocity is so liberating because it spurs creative reimagining of established forms of cultural and political belonging. These gaps in harmony, rationality, and control are not aberrations but critical steps in processes of *daashika*, of breaking apart and reconfiguring existing paradigms of self, community, and nation.

After Corwin's concert Evelina walks out of the hospital by his side. When she does so, she enters back into the past tense narration and returns home to the bosom of her family and directly confronts the patriarchal, nationalist historicism it has been freighted with. She does this by seeking out her former mentor, a nun at the local convent, who gives her an alternative version of the lynching that Evelina's grandfather Mooshum had told her. When Evelina cannot answer the nun's question "Were you cured?" it prompts a discussion where both women admit their lack of faith in a benevolent god. Sister Mary Anita reveals that this has to do with her own grandfather's culpability in setting the lynching in motion...as well as Evelina's grandfather's. Mooshum had been with the men who first happened upon the scene of the murder, but knowing the racist tenor of the surrounding neighbors, the group resolved to tell no one of what they found. Yet later that evening, Mooshum foolishly let word of the atrocity slip to his white father-in-law—who shortly afterward set the events of the lynching in motion. After this startling

revelation, Evelina confronts Mooshum, demanding that he verify the nun's tale and admit partial responsibility for the deaths he had always cited as irrefutable evidence of white greed and violence. After he admits his role, the two drive to the scene of the lynching, a tree "which still grew on Marn's land, where Billy's Peace's kindred used to stay" (253). Standing in its shadow Mooshum knots together the boots of one of the victims and tosses them high into the branches. After this he brings together two foundational pieces of his history—the moment he met his wife amidst the plague and the tragic murder of innocents—to proclaim that "the doves are still up there" nestled in the branches of the hanging tree (254).

By combining the family's reputation for "deathless romantic encounters" with the deadly events surrounding the lynching, the eponymous doves take on new meaning. That is, they become both the roving white plague that scours the land as well as the boots of the boy who had been hanged alongside the men, forever "walking, still walking, on air" above Mooshum. The boy, Paul Holy Track, was so named because he was not only pious but because his boots had crosses nailed to the bottom of them—a safeguard his consumptive mother had insisted upon so that "the sickness will not follow you. Evil will not cross your tracks" (58). Only part of what she said was true, for it wasn't tuberculosis that killed Paul, but rather "town fever," the murderous desire for control, ownership, and domination. In this way these white and brown doves, holy birds and boots, come to resemble the deadly, yet enduring motif of a transcendental spirit: the enabling paradigm of a rapacious and commodifying Euroamerican value system.

In this way, too, Erdrich suggests that the doves represent historicism's uprooting of the past and its migration into personal and communal lives, becoming "deathless" kernels of a nationalist identity politics that thrive on the reversal, but not the pluralization of colonial binaries of power. Yet Erdrich suggests that these moments of challenging received narratives of the past, though painful, can provide generative new insights and adaptations for future survivance. The tropes of ineradicable, latent pathology that predominate in Erdrich's later texts

suggest both the danger that lay within nationalist historicism and its transcendent identity politics as well as the promise and experimentation contained within forms of political and cultural production that are grounded in uncertainty. Though, like Evelina, we may never be cured, at least our misplaced faith in transcendental certainties has been replaced with far more beautiful and harmonious “dark assurance” that no matter how small or sick we are nevertheless always “whole.”

CONCLUSION

In foregoing chapters, I have demonstrated how tropes of infection, latency, and incurable pathology have been used within an archive of postnationalist texts written by both Afro- and Native American authors to illuminate the internal contradictions of neoliberal multiculturalism. Within these texts disease signals the perils of a politics buttressed by identities that are transcendent, nostalgic, and deterministic. I have argued that pathology plays a dual role, highlighting not just the etiology of multicultural identity politics but also the inefficacy of its cures. On the one hand, somatic ailments mirror how chronic economic inequity eviscerates acts of cultural exchange, and subtly erodes Civil Rights and Self-Determination reforms. In another sense, however, the sickly body alerts readers to the proscriptive cultural identity politics that seek to salve economic exploitation with esoteric traditional values. By prizing connection and contingency over isolation and determinism, pathological tropes reveal the rhyme between commodified and nostalgic reproductions of minority identity, and counter both with depictions of individuals and communities that are interdependent and mutable. The pathological body is thus a rich and historically resonant trope that magnifies the paradox of both neoliberal multiculturalism and the identity politics deployed to resist it.

Since the recession of 2008, neoliberal policies have spread and economic precarity has increased against a backdrop of renewed attacks on civil liberties, redistributive practices, and democratic norms. In her recent *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, political scientist Wendy Brown has cogently argued that in this period the “economization of political life”—where market reasoning and rationality infiltrate non-economic spheres of belonging—has been accelerating (17). In *Demos* Brown extends Omi and Winant’s argument,

which traced the rearticulation of Civil Rights discourses in the name of privatization, to describe how the tenets of equal access and equal protection have been combined with multicultural ideology to valorize corporate competition in our legislative chambers and courtrooms. In her analysis of the *Citizen United* Supreme Court ruling from 2010, Brown explains that in majority opinion delivered by Justice Kennedy, he “positions the court as enfranchising not the powerful, but the disliked, the unwanted, and the historically excluded” and likens corporate entities to a “historically disenfranchised class of persons” who may now “freely compete in the political marketplace” (Kennedy 24-5; Brown 154-57). In so doing, he unwittingly deploys the language of rights discourses to obscure the transformation of a democratic sphere into an arena of zero-sum competition. Here we see not only how easily the rhetoric from the Civil Rights Era can be contorted to erode the very reforms the movement had originally fought to secure, but how the democratic processes that made those very reforms possible are themselves now under attack. In this environment, in which rights discourses are transmuted from “instruments of resistance against discrimination and against state power” into the tools wielded by the powerful to reconfigure the political landscape in their favor (Brown 167), revanchist factions have intensified their public attacks against redistributive and anti-racist social programs.¹¹⁷

The intensification and penetration of neoliberal policy into all spheres of life has been enabled, in part, by arguments that the United States had officially become a “post-partisan, post-racial society” following the election of Barak Obama.¹¹⁸ The assertions that the national race

¹¹⁷ The austerity policies that had slowed during President Obama’s years in office we renewed again only very recently, with the election of Donald Trump (whose most recent budget proposes drastic cuts to human services spending while increasing tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans) many state legislatures passed regressive laws on issues like concealed carry permits, voter ID, right to work, school of choice, and immigration in the last decade with the assistance of the American Legislative Exchange Council.

¹¹⁸ This was famously argued by Lou Dobbs on his eponymous show shortly after President Obama’s election. Claims that the federal government or American democracy were post-racial or colorblind date back much further than 2008, of course. Sociologist Leslie Carr dated the advent of “colorblind racism,” the precursor to post-racial claims, to the early 1980s. Both conceal or obfuscate revanchist attempts to roll back Civil Rights reforms. The post-racial claims that bloomed in the year leading up to and immediately following the election of the nation’s first black President were little different than the colorblindness that came before. For more on the Obama era evocations of post-racialism, see political scientist Michael

problem was solved were contradicted, of course, by ample evidence that systemic racism was (and is still) responsible for disproportionately high rates of social, political, and economic adversity minorities face.¹¹⁹ Yet the promise of postracialism was not entirely unfounded, as groundbreaking discoveries made by the Human Genome Project definitively rejected the concept of biological race once and for all in the late 1990s. In 1997 a researcher with the Project named Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza stated that races are not genetically homogeneous (that there is more genetic variability within any given race than between any two races) and the head of the Project, Francis Collins, declared that race was so “flawed” and “weak” a concept that it ought to be abandoned altogether (513). In the five years that followed Sforza’s initial pronouncement, the American Anthropological Association, the Federal Census Bureau and President Bill Clinton all endorsed the Project’s findings, citing them to reiterate that race is a social construct, not a biological fact. Despite this scientific shift, however, critic Madhu Dubey finds that the federal government continues to use “race as a sorting device considered necessary for tracking the as-yet incomplete progress of civil rights goals of inclusion and redress, even as federal directives ritually reiterate the disclaimer that state standards of racial classification should not be taken for scientific facts” (“Racecraft” 366). Despite the scientific rejection of race as a biological category, and the eagerness to archive racist ideologies firmly in the past, racist logics nevertheless continue to be employed as the yard stick by which we measure current social conditions.

Under these circumstances, racial identity emerges as more fraught than ever. As I have argued before, pathological tropes emerged in fiction written in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s to highlight the racist remainder that lies beneath the turn to cultural panaceas touted by

Dawson’s article “One Year Later and the Myth of the Post-Racial Society,” 247-49.

¹¹⁹ The statistics available in the nonprofit United for a Fair Economy’s report *State of the Dream 2009: The Silent Depression* tracks the progression of the trends noted in the Millennium Breach Report. The report finds that there is still a large gap between white and black America in terms of housing, education, wealth, and employment.

both neoliberalism as well as minority identity politics. The remarkable durability of identities that are inborn, homogenous, and unchanging and the heightened fragility of the communities they are meant to aid has sparked an acute sense of dissonance within contemporary culture. Afro- and Native American authors have responded to this growing tension in remarkably similar ways. *Pace* Dubey, several distinct types of responses are discernable within a broad sample of contemporary fiction. The first she outlines is that many ethnic American authors have turned to unconventional genres like science fiction to parse the afterlife of racist identitarianism, a keen strategy for

revealing both the truth and the lie of race, its status as both a determinative political fact and an absurd ontological fiction. Departing from straightforwardly realist literature, science fiction imagines worlds that blatantly deviate from contemporaneous social reality. This deviation, which extrapolates from trends and logics already at work in the social world of the reader, is what produces the effect of critical estrangement from actually existing reality. Yet the “cognitive” component ... demands that the text’s deviation from realism be legible according to the rules of scientific rationality. (“Biopolitics” 49-50)

There has been no dearth in fiction exploring the incoherence of twenty-first century cultural identity politics through the lens of dystopic speculative fiction, as recent works by Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), Nalo Hopkinson, Larissa Lai, Sherman Alexie (Spokane), Walter Moseley, and Chang-rae Lee can attest.

The second trend Dubey notes lay in critique of historicism at work within contemporary fiction. Such texts focus on the narrative possibilities anachronistic racial formations pose as they are continually reanimated in the present. In these works Dubey finds a tendency to “literalize potent racial tropes from the past” to both reckon the degree of racial progress and “to test continuing credibility and seduction of apparently defunct fictions of race” (371). By drawing attention to the volatility of racial metaphors, such texts “underscore the difficulty of substantiating truth claims about persisting racial injury,” to decisively confront the paradoxical formation of race in the postnationalist period (“Racecraft” 370).

Yet what Dubey's innovative new project does not account for is how pathology is already used by ethnic American authors to literalize the manifold wounds inflicted by structural racism. Not only do the enervating illnesses portrayed in such texts symbolize the most recent evolutional discrimination (in the shift from acute conditions that swiftly lead to the patient's demise to slow, chronic processes that gradually sicken their hosts) within neoliberal multiculturalism, but the ailed or ambivalent acts of healing in these fictions suggest that racialism besets minority communities from within as well as from without. Put differently, this "racism without racists" is abetted by both the incoherence of ethnoracial forms of belonging circulating on a broader level as well as the characterizations of identity as internal, immutable, and proscriptive that are produced within minority communities. This cultural identity politics generates an equally reductive sense of the collective, which devolves into the tasks carrying, production, and dissemination—and not the creative application of beliefs, values, and practices that enables marginalized communities to adapt to new stressors. Pathological motifs thus reflect both the effects of systemic discrimination as well as illuminate the fundamental logic that enables it. Pathology allows us to understand not just how culture is revealed to be a failed substitute for race, but how the same racialism infects and undermines both neoliberal multiculturalism as well as its ideological rival, the therapeutic historicism of cultural identity politics.

I argue that to better understand the effects of neoliberal acceleration on the novels of the past decade, we need to carefully reconsider the texts that evince both strategies Dubey has divined in recent fiction: namely those that literalize common racial tropes in dystopic science fiction. As they do so, these works place a finer point on earlier critiques of the postnationalist moment. Such texts pair technophobic dystopias with structures that literalize racist metaphors to examine not just the instability of ethnoracial identification but how this instability has fueled the intensification of structural racism itself under neoliberal multiculturalism. Pathological motifs in

these most recent novels look both outward and inward to confront the decontextualization and conscription that characterizes the production and proliferation of ethnoracial identities for either profit or self-defense.

Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* and Blake Hausman's (Cherokee) *Riding the Trail of Tears* (2011) are excellent examples of technophobic science fiction that takes a peculiarly literal approach to broaching the confluence of historicism and individuation that upholds structural racism. Whitehead's protagonist Mark Spitz, for instance, is one of many traumatized civilians laboring thanklessly to prepare Manhattan for resettlement after the city—and the entire globe—was nearly gutted by a rapidly-mutating plague that has turned the majority of humanity into zombies. The majority of the bacterium's victims quickly transform into "skels" that roam in ceaseless search of flesh, but for unknown reasons some instead become "stragglers" that are as immobile as their counterparts are restive, harmless mannequins frozen in mundane poses they'd assumed in past lives. With the majority of the skels eliminated and a safe zone established in what was once Chinatown, the novel follows Spitz and his team as they work meticulously, block by block, to kill, bag, and drag stragglers (as well as any stray corpses they happen across) from the vertical warrens they once inhabited and (perhaps) still haunt.

The tone of *Zone One* is less one of terror than it is of ennui. As Spitz and his fellow sweepers cycle in their monotonous rounds through identical apartment- and office buildings, they are confronted time and again by the same modish and moderately priced furniture arranged in endless permutations of the same, a continuous backdrop for tragedies that are all too similar. As the narrative of Spitz's final days in Manhattan progresses, he grows increasingly aware that as he and other survivors rebuild the city they are also reactivating "the System ... the invisible fist that had floated above" the old world, and which had tracked and "paraphrased [human beings] into numbers, components of bundled data to be shot out through fiber-optic cable toward meaning" (17). The two worlds collide because Spitz "actively seeks concordance" between his

prelapsarian life and his new one, “conjuring [images of] an acquaintance or loved one into these creatures” so that his grim methods of dispatch become acts of mercy, not mere routine (16). Yet as he does so, he becomes increasingly aware that his new occupation as an efficient “killing machine” does not differ drastically from his old life as a brand manager for a large corporation (98). Before the interregnum, Spitz was a self-avowed “binary vulture” trolling social media networks, vigilant so that “when he saw meat, he pounced” to offer a low-value gift card or some other meaningless and wholly insincere affirmation (150). This predatory and insatiable pose is mirrored not just by Spitz, but also by the Reconstruction government itself, which liberally dispenses bullets and bromides from its headquarters in Buffalo. In exchange for this steady stream of propaganda manufactured to lift the spirits of its civilian volunteers, Buffalo demands its sweepers provide a tremendous amount of data—scavenging and cataloguing the names and identities of stragglers, skels, and corpses they dispose of—even as it imposes absurd injunctions against salvaging any goods from the Zone that do not enjoy the imprimatur of a corporate sponsor. Despite the fact that he has traded his Instagram account for an assault rifle, Spitz’s disquieting discovery is that his new job is little different from the old.

The life of a sweeper in *Zone One*, both entirely expendable yet constrained at every turn by a corporatized government, resonates with the status of subjects within neoliberal regimes like our own. According to Wendy Brown, as neoliberalism moves from a set of economic policies to a governing, normative order, the subject who is “construed and constructed as human capital both for itself and for a firm or state is at persistent risk of failure, redundancy and abandonment...regardless of how savvy and responsible it is” (37). We can see this in Whitehead’s novel as competition often pits teams of sweepers against each other, as they vie for preferable assignments (i.e. buildings with fewer stories) and the approval of their military commanders. This is all in the hopes that they will be given preferential status once the island is cleared and housing lottery is held to determine who will get to inhabit the city’s once-gleaming

high-rises. As capital in perpetual competition and circulation, Spitz and his peers cleave to Buffalo's slogan "We Make Tomorrow!" as they "toil...to transport the old ways across the violent passage of the calamity to the safety of the other side" of the interregnum (48). As they strive towards future horizons, they become the instruments and carriers of the past—ignoring their present precarity and exploitation. This becomes literally true a few pages later, when Spitz initially mishears the medical diagnosis given for another survivor's seizure. An attendant explains that the man's convulsions are not being caused by an infection but by "his past...his P-A-S-D" or Post Apocalyptic Stress Disorder (55). Spitz's own, relatively mild, PASD manifests as the delusion that ash from the crematoriums is all-pervasive, "in every raindrop on his skin and the pavement, sullyng every edifice and muting the blue sky: the dust of the dead. It was in his lungs, becoming assimilated into his body" (187).

Just as Spitz's PASD contaminates his body, so too does an interloper from the past infect the protagonist of Blake Hausman's debut novel, *Riding the Trail of Tears* (2011). *Tears* covers just one day in the life of Tallulah Wilson, a mixedblood young professional who is the sole Cherokee cultural consultant at a virtual reality theme park, the Tsalagi Removal Exodus Point Park (TREPP)¹²⁰ located in Athens, Georgia, sometime in the near future. Tallulah's story is told by a Nunnehi or "Little Little Person," a benevolent immortal being "smaller than your tear ducts" who has taken up residence inside the ride. Our Nunnehi narrator—or Nunnerator, as he prefers to be called—begins his prologue by explaining the Nunnehi were almost completely erased from human memory during "the first American revolution" of 1400, when the Cherokees rose up and killed the entire priestly caste (3). Before the construction of TREPP, he states that "the possibility of reconstruction...of reinsert[ing] our presence into tribal mythologies" was almost inconceivable (5). Yet with the creation of virtual Trail of Tears ride, the Nunnehi were

¹²⁰ Tsalagi or Aniyunwiya are the names the Cherokee use to refer to their nation, language, and culture—Cherokee is the name that was given to them by neighboring nations.

able to regain a means of accessing and interacting with the real world, making “the digital earth” there into a new “homeland” (13). They are chiefly concerned with resisting, expanding, and revising the ride’s restrictive programing, given that much of the information used to write it was drawn from suspiciously similar accounts given by “early American ethnohistorians—those Reconstruction-era scholars” who seem to recycle the same three eyewitness accounts and who Tallulah suspects of “meld[ing] shards of memory in the fires of nostalgia” in their desire to capture authentic Cherokee culture (173).

The Nunnerator explains how he gained freedom from TREPP’s nostalgic version of the past by climbing out of the machine to hitch a ride home with Tallulah at the end of her shift one day, hiding amongst her hair follicles and returning to the digital world with her when she logged back in the following morning. The Nunnerator repeated this cycle of escape and every night for months, an experience that was exhilarating for him but which eventually prompted a “sickness...after the second month of my residence in her head” (1) whose symptoms—insomnia, migraines, anxiety, and nausea—grew so severe that Tallulah “was clinically sick” on the day the tale unfolds (17). Though the Nunnerator seems to regret this, he intimates that no lasting damage was done and that his actions were necessary so that both he and Tallulah could break free from the reductive Reconstruction accounts that limit the roles both play in the virtual Trail of Tears.

Similar to Spitz, Tallulah’s job is characterized by long stretches of boredom punctuated with terror: for she also serves as a regular tour guide on the virtual Trail. This means that twice daily, five days a week, and fifty weeks a year, she relives the sights, sounds, and sensations of a forced death march that took place over several months in 1838, where at least a quarter of the Cherokee were murdered or died from starvation, exposure, or disease. The ride is a four-hour interactive journey speckled with “virtual violence” (59), in which tourists don full-body suits and immersive audio and visual helmets that will simulate all the stimuli encountered by

Cherokees who walked the actual Trail of Tears. Not only does each rider virtually walk a thousand miles in another person's footsteps—but they also look the part, as they inhabit avatars that are ethnicized versions of themselves. Tourists walk the Trail in accelerated time, whilst Tallulah peppers them with chestnuts from “her standardized tour guide dialogue” to render the experience nominally educational (45, 68, 85). Noticeably, Tallulah's nausea often interrupts the palaver she offers her tour groups. Her

stomach grinds while telling her tourists that it will all be over soon. For her it never ends... Although each tour is different, the Trail of Tears always proceeds in the same fashion. Details alter slightly, but the overall sequence of events is helplessly predictable. Nothing really changes Nothing really ends. (60-1)

She encourages her charges to bear the simulations of starvation, maiming, and abuse from soldiers by reminding them that they are participating in a historical interpretation that isn't real, and that “the virtual pain sensations inside the Trail of Tears are more like numbness than actual pain” (256). If they make it all the way to Oklahoma, she chirps, they will receive a free survivor t-shirt and a five-dollar voucher redeemable at the TREPP gift shop. They will all be home in time for dinner. She is regularly disappointed, though perhaps not surprised, that the experience seems to have no lasting impact on many of her tourists. Staving off tedium and terror with promises of a familiar future that grows increasingly brighter in comparison, the reproduction of a fictive indigenous past is revealed as nothing more than a means to extract fares from bored voyeurs hoping to while away hot summer days.

Yet not all the tourists to the past are routed into the predictable channels of consumerism, and the one who escapes this trajectory is notable in that she also suffers from chronic nerve pain: Irma Rosenberg, and octogenarian matriarch from Brooklyn riding the Trail with her family. Older and more discerning than the others, Irma is swift to appreciate the temporary relief her digital avatar affords her from her sciatica, and equally quick to doubt Tallulah's “partial lies” (256) regarding the relationship between the virtual and real pain. Her

skepticism regarding the inviolability of the digital divide is furthered when she is abducted by mischievous Nunnehi (not our Nunnerator), and shuttled to an obscure corner of the Ride known as the Misfit Stockade, where the rogue programs that do not conform to Reconstruction-era stereotypes of the tragic and vanishing Indian are quarantined from the rest. The group is an incredibly diverse bunch, a “hodge-podge medley of Cherokee” of different ages wearing “outfits from various points in time...[s]ome wore turbans, some wore feathers, some wore buckskin, some wore silk, but all held themselves high” (244). Once there Irma mediates between two factions of the digital nation: the pragmatic “insider” politician who fends off the intrusive, officious, and violent federal agents and who attends to the daily needs of the Misfits, and the “outsider” activists comprised of a council of Elders and youth who desire to leave the stockade and reclaim their digital homeland in North Carolina. She eventually convinces the former to join forces with the latter, and “in the most powerful act of self-determination they had ever performed,” the united Misfit forces break down the walls of their stockade and override the Trail’s programing, “marching away from the past and the future as they moved together into the present” (244).

Here political theorist William Connolly’s work may be helpful to think through how certain acts of role experimentation can lead from painful precarity to renewed political mobilization. In his work, *The Fragility of Things*, Connolly posits that the revitalization of democratic norms enervated by neoliberal consumerism may begin “with the positive possibilities of micro-experimentation on several fronts” (182). This is because

Role experimentation can disrupt and redirect the flow of authority, habit, institutional regularity, and future project. It can also encourage others to look more closely at their own performances in this or that domain. Such experiments can also set the stage for more adventurous and larger scale actions. (185)

In this light, the slight shifts enabled by Irma’s assumption of a more youthful Cherokee avatar within the ride cause her to question received notions of the divide between the virtual and the

real, which cause her to meaningfully intervene in Misfit politics, triggering their repatriation of sovereign territory, which inspires Tallulah to quit her position at TREPP and close its doors for good. The complicated interplay between the real and the virtual, indigenous and Euroamerican agents, individuals and collectives here override the forces of commodification and self-interest to generate new constituencies no longer bound to exploitative modes of interaction and exchange.

Just as the toppling of the Misfits' prison stockade triggers a more thoughtful, pluralist politics dictated by the masses as they shake of nostalgic bromides in Hausman's novel, so too does the rupture of Zone One's barricades encourage Mark Spitz to abandon the stale "dioramas of futurity" to dive in and immerse himself, finally, within "the ruthless chaos of existence" that roils the waters of his present moment (258). It is critical to note that the catalyst for Spitz's abandonment of the Zone and the coercive neoliberal regime that it represents begins not with the fall of the barricade but earlier, the moment when a seemingly-harmless straggler breaks the proverbial rules and bites a member of Spitz's team. This traumatic event leaves the sweeper team shaken, and prompts Spitz to share a memory of a former comrade, Quiet Storm, whose massive and unfinished mosaic of cleared cars along I-95 served as her own, idiosyncratic means of "writ[ing] her way into the future" (233). Quiet Storm's tale is situated as a viable alternative to the "dioramas of futurity" offered by the Reconstruction, in that she creates a new "grammar" (232) through which to make meaning once the simple binaries collapse beneath the crush of the zombie masses, those "angry" and unwilling to "chase long-gone versions of themselves" trapped in the past but determined to live "in the new place" forming from the ashes of the old (258).

Both texts, therefore, look askance at the nostalgia of the "Reconstruction-eras" by closely aligning the reductive representations of the past with pathological tropes and the engines of consumption and ethnic exploitation in the present. Mark Spitz is freed of his PASD, "the dead world floating ... [t]he detritus that passed for identity" (50)—at the same moment the barricades

protecting Zone One are finally overrun. He is no longer haunted by its historicism, that is, in the same moment the “Reconstruction, the return of the System” fails (89). Because it is characterized by states of siege, segregation, barriers and the strange ghostly “detritus” of identity, this new development is presented ambivalently in *Zone One*. As Manhattan falls beneath the onslaught of an inexplicably revived zombie horde, Spitz turns away from a dubious Reconstruction caked in the ash of identity politics that disguise the mechanisms of neoliberal individuation and control, to finally confront the reality of unending struggle once more.

The work of this dissertation has been to address the lacuna in the existing criticism addressing paradoxical forms of ethnoracial belonging within postnationalism. Many of these critiques of identity politics in ethnic American fiction, although incisive, fail to look beyond delineating the symptoms—cultural reification, determinism, and historicism—to see the cure. That is, what this emphasis on the diagnostic ironically has not accounted for is the prominent usage of the pathological in ethnic American literature to plumb the limits and limitations of neoliberal multiculturalism. In place of identitarian paradigms that encourage balkanization and demobilization as they seek to reproduce idealized visions of the past, the texts I examine here take another tack. That is, fiction by postnationalist Afro- and Native American authors use pathological tropes to stress states of entanglement, mutual dependency and vulnerability and to transgress and reassess the *cordon sanitaire* that divides minority from majority, brown from white, the masses from their leaders, and past from present. As they do so, tropes of illness and disease enable a thickening of subjectivity and temporality as they gesture towards a multiplicity of sites and types of connection that leave the binary world far behind. Both a reckoning and a reconceiving, figurations of pathological embodiment reveal the execrable echo of identitarianism within both neoliberal and therapeutic iterations of culture, but also proffer a contingent and pluralist politics to take its place.

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