

Only Connect: The Virtual Communities of Gertrude Stein and David Foster Wallace

by

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## **Examining Committee Membership**

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

My dissertation compares Modernist imaginations and applications of early radio with Late Postmodernist imaginations and applications of the early internet. The American authors that I focus on and compare in my dissertation are Gertrude Stein, a Modernist, and David Foster Wallace, a Late Postmodernist.

My dissertation asserts that Stein and Wallace each incorporate the techno-cultural imaginations and feelings of community through the democratic poetics and aesthetics of their work. Both Stein and Wallace engage with facilitating literary communities that form around emerging mass media—for Stein, the radio, and for Wallace, the blog—and provoke readers to participate in auto/biographical practices as a mode of discussing American identity, community, and democracy. Where the orality of Stein's texts invites readers' auto/biographical engagement, Wallace's written depictions of mental health, addiction, and loneliness prompt readers to share auto/biographical narratives/disclosures related to those topics in the reading group discussions.

Altogether, my dissertation engages with a unique media archeological combination of literary analysis, media studies, and critical media production in order to suss out the dynamic exploration of identity, community, and democratic participation these authors and their readers feel for within the mediascape of their respective eras.

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>ADMAU</i>	<i>A Dictionary of Modern American Usage</i>
ARRL	American Radio Relay League
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
BBS	Bulletin Board System
<i>CMC</i>	Computer Mediated Communication
<i>CML</i>	Critical Media Lab
<i>EA</i>	<i>Everybody's Autobiography</i>
<i>EFF</i>	Electric Frontier Foundation
<i>FCC</i>	Federal Communications Commission
FRC	Federal Radio Commission
<i>IJ</i>	<i>Infinite Jest</i>
<i>IRC</i>	Internet Relay Chat
MUDs	Multi-User Dungeons
NAB	National Association of Broadcasters
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
RCA	Radio Corporation of America
WELL	Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link

## Chapter 1, Introduction: 20th-Century America's Electric Dreams of Community

### **War of the Media**

In the September 4, 2017 issue of *The New Yorker*, the subheadline of Adrien Chen's "Fake News Fallacy" article reads, "Old fights about radio have lessons for new fights about the Internet" ("Fake News Fallacy" 78). The article begins with Orson Welles' infamous 1938 "War of The Worlds" broadcast that convinced many American listeners that they were under alien attack, introducing a moral panic around radio after the broadcast. Chen points out how this moment in American radio history sparked debates about the democratic access and participation of radio broadcasting in America. Welles' broadcast contradicted many Americans' ideas of radio's alleged democratic quality and its role in providing American citizens with truthful news that countered the propaganda broadcasts of European fascists, Nazi Germany, and other "malicious tricksters like Welles" (78). For Chen, Welles demonstrated to America's commercial broadcasters and politicians the powerful role of mass media technology in shaping the public's imaginations, their politics, and their perspectives on the world. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), more than ever, felt obligated to take an "active role to protect [the American] people" (Chen 78). Chen connects this significant moment of American radio's struggle to integrate or recuperate a democratic system within radio broadcasting to debates about the internet as a supposedly democratic medium. He writes, "The openness [of the internet] that was said to bring about a democratic revolution instead seems to have torn a hole in the social fabric." The article details the way the conservative right accused radio broadcasting of "suppressing" conservative content on account of the content not being the "truth" just as the alt-right and the Trump Administration have accused internet platforms and "the media" of suppressing conservative content because that content is "fake news." The picture accompanying

the article features laptops with tentacles like those of the aliens in Steven Spielberg's 2005 adaptation of "War of the Worlds" with the caption "Radio, in its early days, was seen as a means of spreading hysteria and hatred, just as the Internet is today." Yet, despite Chen's focus on the internet of "today" (2017+), radio's early days also share the same kind of hopes, imaginations, and debates that the early internet has in the 1980s and 1990s (when the so-called "democratic revolution" was said to be happening). My dissertation finds this comparison between the radio and the internet to be fruitful and focuses its attention on the early years of both radio and the internet when new arguments about democratic participation, community, and American identity were emerging with these media.

In this dissertation, my comparative focus is on radio's history in the 1920s-1930s and internet's history in the 1980s-1990s. These time periods locate each respective medium when they were an emergent medium and when the protocols surrounding these media were unfixed. Protocols, Lisa Gitelman writes, "express a huge variety of social, economic, and material relationships" (8); they are never static and vary according to social, economic, material, and, I'll add, literary relationships (like Welles' "War of the Worlds"). As Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree add, "There is a moment, before the material means and the conceptual modes of new media have become fixed, when such media are not yet accepted as natural, when their own meanings are in flux" (xii). Chen draws attention to the similar fluctuating debates about democratic access, participation, and community in early radio and the internet, and how these debates largely revolve around the *meaning* of each medium. Bertolt Brecht lamented in 1932 that radio should be a two-way communications medium, and he dreamed of "chang[ing] this apparatus over from distribution to communication...a vast network of pipes" (15). Brecht goes on to argue that radio's vast network of pipes would turn "the audience not only into pupils but

into teachers” (16). Brecht’s position is echoed in arguments about the internet, such as Henry Jenkins’ work on “participatory culture” and “prosumers” or in John Perry Barlow’s 1996 “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” that claims there is “no sovereignty where we gather” (n.p.). Even Vice-President Al Gore, the self-proclaimed “inventor” of the internet, argued to the International Telecommunications Union that the internet would promote “strong democracies” (n.p.). Theodor Adorno, writing in the late 1930s, was not as positive as Brecht about radio. During his time working for the Radio Research Project funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, Adorno deduced that American radio “serves to keep listeners from criticizing social realities; in short, it has a soporific effect upon social consciousness” (275). Adorno viewed radio as anything but democratic; instead, radio only enforced a politics that listeners could not be critical of, never mind being able to participate in the medium to produce different content and provide alternative views. Adorno’s arguments are echoed by those who challenge the utopian ideas about the internet as early as the 1990s. Neil Postman, like Adorno, critiqued the trivialness of internet technology and the cultural “deification” of technology (71). Elsewhere, writers like James Brook and Iain Boal in the 1990s encouraged Americans to “resist the virtual” in *Resisting the Virtual Life*. These arguments about the radio and the internet are on opposite ends of extremes, but they demonstrate the unfixed meaning attributed to these media when they were emergent. Further, these arguments illustrate Chen’s point that a “debate over the role of mass communication” is strongly shared by these two media and begs further investigation (n.p.).

Chen’s article illuminates that the juxtaposition of radio and the internet is a means of unpacking arguments that are embedded in technology, culture, politics, and art. Examining the rhetoric, uses, and imaginations of radio in the 1920s/1930s is instructive for understanding the rhetoric, uses, and imaginations of the internet, and vice versa. Chen, however, is not alone in

comparing the internet to the radio to discuss American conceptions of democratic participation, identity, and community. Chen's New Yorker article is one more recent article among many that compare the internet of today to the radio of yesterday. These articles stress the similar rhetoric, technological infrastructure, and cultural imaginations between radio and the internet, emphasizing their close relationship to illuminate American conceptions of democratic participation, community, and identity formation in mass media. Matt Mollgaard and Pierre C. B elanger have presented the internet as radio's saving grace, allowing radio stations to be heard far beyond their local proximities and evoking the pleasure of serendipitous encounters that radio originally fostered. Similarly, David Goodman notes, "we who have lived through the...digital era can identify with some of the euphoria that greeted radio." (xiii). In Susan Douglas's introduction to *Listening In*, she uses Sherry Turkle's studies on online identity to "ask how radio, which brought so many diverse personalities into the home, set the stage for this new twentieth-century relationships between the self and unseen others, and between the local and the distant" (11). Further, Douglas echoes the sentiments explored in Chen's article, writing, "[m]ore than the movies, mass magazines, or television (and *up until the Internet*), radio has been the mass medium through which the struggles between rampant commercialism and a loathing of that commercialism have been fought over and over again" (16; my emphasis). And in *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green note, "Today's era of online communication demonstrates some decisive steps in the directions Brecht...advocated, expanding access to the means of cultural production...and to cultural circulation within and across diverse communities" (161). These articles or books range from a deeply sustained comparison (Chen; Mollgaard) to anecdotal statements (Douglas; Goodman), with some presenting a teleological view of progress from the radio to the internet (Jenkins, Ford, and Green). The comparisons

between radio and the internet suggest more than interesting similarities; instead, these comparisons draw attention to a relationship between radio and the internet that, when positioned together, reveal striking imbrications of technology, culture, and art/literature that explore American conceptions of democratic participation, community, and identity formation. As Chen claims, the debates over the role of mass communication were “reignited” by the internet. But whereas Chen locates this “reignition” by the internet in 2017, these arguments go back further to the 1980s and 1990s.

My research intervention in this ongoing comparison between the radio and internet is including literature in investigating the similar rhetoric, imaginary, and material histories of these media. The lacuna of literature in these studies may exist because of temporal differences: to study literature’s engagement with early radio and early internet is to position Modernist texts (roughly circa 1900-45) and what I call Late Postmodern texts (roughly 1980s-2010s, see Chapter 4 for more on this term) together, a diachronic task that is not common in literature studies. Yet, following Wai Chee Dimock, I am interested in the *resonances* between these two time periods, their literature, and their then-emerging mass media. What particularly stands out in Chen’s *New Yorker* article is how Welles’ “The War of the Worlds” is not only presented as partaking in the cultural imaginations of radio but is also used to articulate the resonances between the political debates about radio and the internet. Literature, I argue, is both a process and product of thinking *and* feeling a way through the imbrications of technology and culture (shortened to “techno-cultural” imbrications): literature equally processes the cultural engagements with media as it is also a product of those cultural engagements with media. Thus, literature participates in what Raymond Williams calls the “structures of feeling” that form around emergent media. A structure of feeling contains “characteristic elements of consciousness

and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (132). In my dissertation, I focus on how writers “tap into” those feelings while communicating what they feel, even if they have had limited engagement with a medium or are not directly writing about the medium. In short, following Mark Goble, I am interested in “how literary form itself might better reflect the felt intensities of modern communication” (Goble 20). Ultimately, literature is a product of and processes both the material realities and the cultural imaginations of technology. Approaching these connections between literature and techno-culture reveal various complex relationships and affects without pinpointing a direct cause or effect. Instead, what is pinpointed are the “mutual emergences” of cultural, technological, and literary feelings (Stone 21). Focusing on the mutual emergences of culture, technology, and literary feelings is, I argue, a media archeological strategy that “uncover dynamic moments...and revel in heterogeneity and, in this way, to enter into a relationship of tension with various present-day moments, relativize them, and render them more decisive” (Zielinski 11). Looking for mutual emergences avoids deterministic arguments and statements<sup>1</sup> to be made and revels in the (cultural and technological) heterogeneity of a medium that is uncovered.

In my dissertation, I compare Modernist imaginations and applications of early radio with Late Postmodernist imaginations and applications of the early internet. My inclusion of literature is both a techno-cultural barometer and an intervention in debates about these media to ask questions of democratic participation, community, and identity formation. My method is *media archeological*, as my juxtapositions are archeological “cuts” to critique techno-determinist notions of technological progress and interrogate the shared protocols (cultural and

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<sup>1</sup>. For instance, Jenkins, Ford, and Green state, “Brecht’s conception of a world where listeners become ‘suppliers’ of material for other listeners has been more fully realized in the digital era than radio ever achieved” (161-2)

technological) of radio and the internet (See Zielinski 7; Emerson xiii). Jussi Parikka points out that the answer to *what is media archeology* “depends on who you ask” (n.p.). And I would add that the methods of media archeology sometimes depends on the research questions of a project. Yet, a general consensus amongst the scholarly work is media archeology’s radical openness towards pluralizing the histories of media objects, inviting experimentation in its methods. As Lori Emerson argues, “media archeology does not seek to reveal the present as an inevitable consequence of the past but instead looks to describe it as one possibility generated out of a heterogenous past” (xiii). My research methods embrace the experimentation and openness of media archeology, and media archeology nicely complements the structures of feelings and mutual emergences I am investigating throughout my dissertation.

From the range of media archeological approaches, I combine the materialist-leaning approach (Wolfgang Ernst; Parikka) with the cultural-leaning approach (Emerson; Erkki Hutamo) to align the early rhetoric and cultural imaginations of radio and the internet, respectively, with the material realities of these respective media. In collaboration with others, I have created *critical media projects* that involve participants to consider the materialities of these media and the affects that these media have on individuals. And to illuminate the rhetorical arguments and cultural imaginations of these media, I include literary and rhetorical analyses of popular writings, essays, poems, novels, and the auto/biographical responses from the participants of my critical media projects. Critical media projects are media that are made in order to aid in critique of those media, materially and culturally. The term *critical media project* comes from the place in which I created these projects: The Critical Media Lab (CML) at the University of Waterloo. At the CML, critical media projects are understood as “objects-to-think-with,” a term coined by Sherry Turkle but repurposed by Marcel O’Gorman to mean



“consider[ing and making] objects as vehicles for testing or generating theories” (O’Gorman 31). More broadly, critical media projects are considered “research-creation,” a term that has recently gone under scrutiny but denotes “new methods that allow us to tell new stories” (Loveless 53) and “tell old stories in new/old ways” (Chapman and Sawchuck 50). My use of “critical media projects” is to clearly signal that I am making projects for critical engagements with the media of my dissertation’s focus. My critical media projects are integral to forming my arguments about the intersections of democratic participation, community, and identity formation shared by the literary and techno-cultural imaginations of the radio and the internet.

The interdisciplinarity of media archeology and critical media projects affords me the ability to produce arguments from the intersections of literary, rhetorical, and medium specific analysis. The American authors that I focus on and compare in my dissertation are Gertrude Stein, a Modernist, and David Foster Wallace, a Late Postmodernist. My dissertation asserts that Stein and Wallace each incorporate the techno-cultural imaginations and feelings of community through the democratic poetics and aesthetics of their work. Further, both Stein and Wallace engage with facilitating literary communities that form around emerging mass media—for Stein, the radio, and for Wallace, the internet but specifically the blog—and provoke readers to participate in auto/biographical<sup>2</sup> practices as a mode of discussing American identity, community, and democracy in the twentieth century. My pairing of these authors is deliberate; putting them and the respective emergent media together reveal strikingly similar relationships between writing and reading practices within these techno-cultural imaginations. Moreover, their

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<sup>2</sup>. Following Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, the “/” in “auto/biography” indicates the relationality and othering that occurs in life writing, as well as fluidity between biography and autobiography (*Reading Autobiography* 256). I choose to refer to auto/biography as such throughout my dissertation because of the shared centrality of relationality and othering to the concept of community.

democratic poetics/aesthetics is strongly informed by a modern, twentieth-century notion of community, which emphasizes relationality, collaborative interaction, and heterogeneity. I understand “democratic” poetics/aesthetics as literary techniques that explicitly and intentionally invoke readers’ participation in the meaning-making of the text, wherein that meaning-making is informed by the individuality of readers and thereby pluralizes the text. Auto/biography may seem an additional element in these democratic poetics/aesthetics, but it is an integral element in these authors’ arguments about community and democracy. Auto/biographical acts are a means of navigating and negotiating a mass-mediated, overwhelmingly connected world and play a primary role in community’s relationality, othering, and in the risk of communication. Thus, my analyses of readers’ responses to these texts in my critical media projects are just as important as analyses of the texts themselves. Both Stein and Wallace, in their own way, invite auto/biographical participation in their texts in order to create a feeling of community. Altogether, my dissertation engages with a unique media archeological combination of literary analysis, media studies, and critical media production in order to suss out the dynamic exploration of identity, community, and democratic participation these authors and their readers feel for within the mediascape of their respective eras.

### **The Radio and Internet Imaginary: The Love of Sincerity, the Affect of Community**

“Only connect! That was her whole sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.” (Forster, *Howard’s End* n.p.)

“‘Communication’ is one of the characteristic concepts of the twentieth century. It has become central to reflections on democracy, love, and our changing times” (Peters, *Speaking into the Air*,

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At the turn of the 20th century, the technological modernity of mass media and the increasing industrialization and expansion of cities seemed to either fragment and isolate individuals from each other or totally subsume that individuality under totalitarian control. As expressed by Margaret Schlegel's sermon in E.M. Forster's 1910 novel, there is a twentieth-century desire or hope for individuals to connect, if only briefly. But in twentieth-century America, this desire to connect is more urgent and central to the nation's ideas of mass communication technologies, particularly the radio and the internet. As Goble argues, "The mediated life of modern U.S. culture takes shape as a network of desires for more intimate, material, and affecting relations with technology" (Goble 19). Radio first offered that promise of brief connection, creating feelings of community at the same time that it lent to that modern feeling of fragmentation. Douglas notes, "Radio has worked most powerfully inside our heads, helping us create internal maps of the world and our place in it, urging us to construct imagined communities to which we do, or do not, belong" (5). She adds further, "Radio, by cultivating different modes of listening, also fostered people's tendency to feel fragmented into many selves, which were called forth in rapid succession, or sometimes all at the same time" (11). The "also" in the previous quote is in response to Turkle's work on the fragmentation of online lives in *Life On the Screen*. For Douglas, the cultural imaginations and structures of feeling that many associate with the early (and even today's) internet has its roots in the imaginations and feelings of early radio. While John Durham Peters argues that the desires and anxieties of communication are centuries old, twentieth century techno-cultural imaginations of the radio and the internet (more prominently than other twentieth century media) has centralized "communication" in reflecting on democratic participation, community, and identity formation.

Throughout my dissertation, I refer to the cultural imaginations of the radio and the internet as the radio or internet *imaginary*. The radio or internet imaginary is an imagination of the media informed by social, political, literary, and national rhetoric that may reflect, contradict, or exaggerate the material realities of that medium (Campbell xiii).<sup>3</sup> The central concerns of both the American radio and internet imaginary are democratic participation, community, and identity formation. In these imaginaries, democratic participation fosters community; and the affect of community interaction forms (and informs) individuals' identities. My dissertation exposes the contradictions and conflicts between the American imaginary and uses of radio and the internet, and the implementations of these imaginaries within cultural media practices and literature. I argue that the poetics and aesthetics of Stein and Wallace participate in and are informed by the radio and internet imaginary, respectively; each of these authors challenge homogenizing forces in the techno-cultural environment to uphold the pluralism and inclusivity that both the radio and internet imaginary promise, but they are not without their faults and failures. Furthermore, I identify that the central creative act in Stein's poetics and Wallace's aesthetics is sincerity, which is strongly informed by the concept of "love" that is mentioned in Forster and Peters. Sincerity, I demonstrate, is not only central to Stein and Wallace but is also significant to radio and the internet to create affective attachments, produce feelings of community, and provide spaces for identity formation. Douglas states, "Sincerity is absolutely crucial [for radio]" (133), and her statement is echoed by Elizabeth M. Reid's study on early computer mediated communication, which argues "[t]he expectation of personal integrity and *sincerity* is both upheld by convention and enforced by structure" (402; my emphasis). Thus, throughout my dissertation, sincerity is a

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<sup>3</sup>. To be clear, "imaginary" in the context of this dissertation does not refer to Lacan's theory of the "imaginary."

creative and rhetorical act within the radio and internet imaginary that encourages democratic participation through auto/biographical response, thereby fostering feelings of community.

The creative and rhetorical act of sincerity unites Stein and Wallace with the imaginaries of radio and the internet. “Sincerity” encompasses reciprocity, self-awareness, and a dialogical relationship between author, reader/audience, and text. Sincerity is notoriously associated with Wallace, the word being used to describe his work in journalism and academic publications. Sincerity is even used to define Late Postmodernism itself, with some scholars defining Late Postmodernist sincerity as “new” because of the mass media environment of 20th-Century America.<sup>4</sup> Yet, I draw from American Modernist Louis Zukofsky’s theorization of sincerity, which was published at the height of radio’s dominance, to locate sincerity in American Modernism as well. Zukovsky privileges sincerity as an extreme self-awareness of writing’s mediation rather than as an expression of a poet’s genuine feelings. Zukovsky argues, “In sincerity...[w]riting occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (273). Sincerity, for Zukofsky, must be situated and embodied, while acknowledging the mediation of these various embodiments; it provides an understanding of writing as a craft and mediation, acknowledging the way the poet feels, sees, and hears the world in their writing while also seeking to acknowledge that the reader feels, sees, and hears the world differently. In Chapter 2, I develop Zukofsky’s concept of sincerity and argue that his conception of sincerity is useful for defining Stein’s and other

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<sup>4</sup>. Adam Kelly is pushing this term throughout his work. His essays include “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction” (2010), “Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace” (2014), “The New Sincerity” (2016), “Language Between Lyricism and Corporatism: George Saunders’s New Sincerity” (2017), and “David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts” (2017). See also “(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Octet’” by Iain Williams, which, in its title, conveys a hesitancy to label Wallace’s sincerity as “new.”

American Modernist writers' work, thereby making sincerity not unique to Late Postmodernism. Moreover, I point out that "sincerity" was a popular technique employed by radio hosts in broadcasting that included medium-specific self-awareness to create a closer relationship with audiences and to affect feelings of community. Thus, I present sincerity as a means of negotiating a mass media-saturated environment by being open and involving others. I assert that sincerity can prompt auto/biographical response, and that auto/biographical disclosures, statements, or narratives are integral to sincerity and to maintaining the openness and involvement of community.

The openness and involvement of community is a connection that is, as Margaret Schlegel's sermon argues, informed by "love," a concept that appears in this dissertation when discussing sincerity and the works of Stein and Wallace. Love embraces the relationality of individuality and respects the otherness of others; love connects without altering or determining self or other. Throughout my dissertation, I argue that the sincerity of Stein and Wallace resist a homogenous, totalizing conception of community, in which that totalizing comes in the form of fascism (for Stein in the 1930s) or late capitalism (for Wallace in the 1990s). Resistance to homogeneity is affect-driven and resonates with the theories of community in the works of Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben, Sara Ahmed, and Roberto Esposito. The participation of Stein's and Wallace's readers through listening, reading, and blogging constitutes what Nancy calls a literary community. Nancy defines the (literary) community as "the unworking [*désœuvrement*] of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional" (31) and is constituted through the sharing of the community's writing "that makes them *others*" (25). Whether it be Stein's realization that community and identity are fundamentally relational by the 1930s in *Everybody's Autobiography* or Wallace's emphasis on the "untrendy,"

vulnerable human acts of communication that form communities in *Infinite Jest*, both authors resist the idea of community as homogenous and strive for the kind of connection Forster's passage depicts. Instead of aligning "with" as a site of "shared co-habitation," Wallace and Stein emphasize the "differentiation" of with-ness (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 48). Throughout their own respective literary careers, Stein and Wallace struggle to articulate a poetics and aesthetics that affords plurality and grants the individual reader agency in their texts.

Thus, community in the works of Stein and Wallace is not what confines an individual to a prescribed or essentialist identity nor does it subject an individual to an identity; instead, community fosters differentiation through understanding identity as fundamentally relational. As Esposito argues, "community cannot have 'subjects' because it is the community itself that constitutes—that deconstructs—subjectivity in the form of its alteration" (Esposito 97). Community's constitution through deconstruction is what Nancy and Blanchot call *désœuvrement* (translated as "unworking"). *Désœuvrement* in the works of Stein and Wallace is an affective intensity that creates space for community by decentering text, author, reader, and institutions. When speaking on the radio for the first time, Stein comments, "you knew you really knew, not by what you knew but by what you felt, that everybody was listening...*I was so filled with it* ("I Came and Here I Am" 72; my emphasis). Before Stein encountered the radio, she had always been interested in filling her works with voices, and specifically readers' voices. As she states in "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," "I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations.... endlessly the same and endlessly different" (138). Although Wallace has not extensively commented on his experiences with the internet or blogging, Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues that the internet's "many-to-many networks...can produce precisely the kinds of human

relationship, the kinds of conversation, that Wallace's vision of the novel meant to foster" (198). Wallace's "vision" for fiction is often attributed to his interview with Larry McCaffrey, in which he states: "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (26; original emphasis). According to Wallace, fiction achieves this vision by giving the reader "imaginative access to other selves" (22). Both Stein and Wallace are concerned with facilitating relationality within their work, of incorporating others' voices and stories into the work so that their readers may listen in, contribute, and expose themselves to others. Each author allows readers to participate in their work, thereby decentering their authority over the text and emphasizing collaboration between the reader(s) and the author.

In my dissertation, I understand "community" as an affective phenomena, hence my use of the term, "feeling of community." Community in the texts I study is not imagined as Benedict Anderson argues, nor is it constituted primarily by proximity; it is constituted through feelings produced by the work of and interaction between individuals and things (in this case: radio, internet blogs, and texts). In my dissertation, "affect" refers to the physical and/or mental feelings that are beyond description/articulation; affect exists and emerges between the interactions of individuals, and affect becomes articulated once mediated.<sup>5</sup> Community is the result of affective intensities produced through individuals' sustained relational encounters with each other, wherein affective intensities are the interactions between all actors (humans and non-humans) that produce affect. Intensities contain the potential to make members of a community *others* instead of a homogenous group of shared interests/identities or who all have something in common. There is always present an exclusionary intensity that *enforces* sameness and connotes "you're either with us or against us" (Ahmed and Fortier 253). Exclusion or homogeneity

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<sup>5</sup>. Brian Massumi puts it this way: affect is "situational" while emotions, which articulate affect, are "contextual" (Massumi 217). Ahmed calls emotions the "[t]he 'mediation' of affect" (*Cultural Politics* 28).



through shared interests may appear as community to some and must be acknowledged. But for my purpose and in the works of Stein and Wallace, community is always open and differential. Stein's and Wallace's writing aim to have readers collaborate with the text and with others reading the text, acknowledging and privileging the relationality between literature, author, and reader. Collaboration requires acknowledging and welcoming difference, thereby leading to feelings of community.

The term "Feelings of community" refers to the affective intensities of sustained collaboration that build community and keep the community open to inclusivity. Throughout my dissertation, "feelings of community" acknowledges the intensities of community: the labour, the interactions, and the embodied affects of individuals within a community. To state "community" suggests the "establishment of community" and implies that community is an end-goal, a product, or something finished and stable. "Feelings of community" does not mean that community is inactual but rather acknowledges that community building is always an affective process that keeps open the community to others. For Wallace, the affective phenomena of community are more explicit because he infuses his writing with affect against the backdrop of Postmodernism's "waning of affect" (Jameson). But Stein, too, aims to affect her listeners towards the feeling of community through the collaborative demands of her writing. Thus, "feelings of community" further acknowledges the feelings amongst community members of being "with" each other in community. Sara Ahmed characterizes "the sociality of being 'with' others" as "getting close enough to touch" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 28). She writes, "So what attaches us, what connects us to this place or that place, to this other or that other is also what we find most touching; it is that which makes us feel" (28). As Ahmed argues, being "with" others and being in community is *touching*, it is something that is felt. But again, Ahmed makes

clear that these feelings can exclude others through the different attachments that are made: “The differentiation between attachments allows us to align ourselves with some others and against other others in the very processes of turning and being turned, or moving towards and away from those we feel have caused our pleasure and pain” (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 28). As I demonstrate in the following chapters, these tensions of moving away and moving towards, of turning and being turned, of pleasure and of pain are present in the work and in the literary communities of Stein and Wallace. These tensions within the communities I study are maintained in such a way so that alignments and antagonisms are welcomed to co-exist and to collaborate but are prevented from dominating and defining the community. Community’s collaboration amongst members of differing attachments, and the feelings this co-existence produce, is fundamental to the democratic poetics of Stein’s writing and the aesthetics of Wallace’s.

### **The Role of Auto/biography in Stein and Wallace**

Auto/biography plays a significant role in the works of Stein and Wallace for maintaining the collaboration between others of differing attachments. Auto/biographical participation in Stein’s texts significantly contribute to feelings of community echoing those feelings that Stein herself felt when speaking on the radio. The auto/biographical participation in Stein’s works, however, is facilitated by the orality of Stein’s writing. Stein is notorious for writing “difficult” Modernist texts that play with language and writing itself, specifically the playfulness of the sound of language(s). The “difficulty” in Stein’s texts, however, is reading the text silently, to read the text for meaning *as writing*. Stein’s texts achieve meaning through the oral engagement of readers, an engagement that is collaborative. Thus, it is not a matter of *reading* Stein but *listening* to Stein and speaking her words. Indeed, all poetry has an oral quality to it, but orality

is radically experimented with throughout Stein's career and is, arguably, one of the central aspects of her democratic poetics.

The orality of Stein's democratic poetics, I argue, participates in the American Modernist radio imaginary, an imaginary that upholds the democratic inclusivity of radio and its orality. The American imaginary positions radio as a democratic medium based on the belief that "all" American voices could be amplified and heard: any one can tell their story. Most American Modernist writers embrace this imaginary, experimenting heavily with voice and using orality to integrate a plurality into their text. Indeed, the plurality of voice is present in Modernist texts globally, but in chapter 2, I detail the localism of the American Modernist radio imaginary by positioning it against the imperialist British imaginary and the fascist Italian imaginary. In the early American radio imaginary, radio elicited *feelings* of dialogism and participation, relationality and intimacy. As Douglas emphasizes, "radio invited them [audiences] to participate actively in the production of the show at hand...[Audiences had a] role in completing the picture, in giving individual meaning to something that went out to a mass audience" (4). In Stein's texts, the reader's oral engagement with the text grants agency to the reader, whose reading is neither incorrect nor correct but brings an individual meaning and sound to the text. As Stein expresses in "Gradual Making of The Making of Americans," she is more interested in *listening* to others: "I always listen. I always have listened. I always have listened to the way everybody has to tell what they have to say" (135). And because, as Roland Barthes argues, each individual has a distinct "grain" to their voice, vocal utterances constitute auto/biographical disclosures much in the way that radio audiences get to know a radio announcer through their voice ("The Grain of the Voice"). The "grain" of the voice, then, is of particular interest to Stein and to other American Modernists' attempts to either capture that grain of voice in writing or to invite

readers' own "grain" into the text. For Stein, the grain of voice is "inside them," an embodiment of the individual and an expression of their identity: "everybody was always telling everything that was inside them that made them that one" (136). Stein's democratic poetics focuses on inviting the grain of the reader's voice into the fields of her text, which collaboration flowers into a dynamic engagement that produces different sounds and readings of the text.

With Wallace, auto/biographical participation in his texts also significantly contribute to feelings of community, with many communities forming on and/or over the internet in response to or in dialogue with his work. The online communities that predominantly discuss Wallace-related items and issues include the Wallace-L listserv, *The Howling Fantods* website, internet projects like Jamie Loftus's "I am eating *Infinite Jest* and will not be stopped," the Lego project *Brick Jest*, and, the focus of my dissertation, annual *Infinite Jest* online reading groups. The online reading group of my study, *Infinite Summer*, contains numerous auto/biographical details from participants in the blog that introduce a feeling of community between participants and the text. Where the orality of Stein's texts invites readers' auto/biographical engagement, Wallace's written depictions of mental health, addiction, and loneliness prompt readers to share auto/biographical narratives/disclosures related to those topics in the reading group discussions. As a result, these auto/biographical disclosures/narratives around mental health, addiction, and loneliness are read alongside *Infinite Jest*, as part of the reading experience, and are used as interpretive aids and for contextualization. While the co-construction of auto/biographical narratives may appear in other online reading groups, *Infinite Summer* and other online *Infinite Jest* reading groups are unique in the duration of their reading schedule (roughly 4 months instead of the book-a-month schedule of other book clubs) and the amount of intense auto/biographical narratives/disclosures that accumulate over this duration. Further, these

auto/biographical writings decenter the text and the authorial intention of Wallace, allowing for readers to contribute meaning to the text through their own personal narratives/disclosures.

Wallace's democratic aesthetics aims for this affective response from his readers throughout his work, an aesthetic that has readers contribute to the meaning of the text through auto/biographical engagement.

I identify Wallace's aesthetics of affecting auto/biographical engagement from and collaboration with readers as an American Late Postmodern aesthetic. I situate the American Late Postmodern aesthetic with the mutual emergence of literature and internet communities in the late 1980s and into the 1990s that sought to foster a new collaborative form of writing, whether that collaboration is *felt* by readers in literature or actualized by individuals on internet communications media. In chapter 4, I put Wallace's writing aesthetics and his writing on democracy in conversation with cyberenthusiasts' rhetorical arguments about the internet's democratic potential. The shared interests of reciprocity, dialogism, and participation between Wallace and the cyberenthusiasts strongly resonate with those very same interests in Stein's work and the radio imaginary. Wallace's experiences with the internet is minimal, using email mostly, and at least one known participation in an Internet Relay Chat room. Yet, several comparisons between Wallace's writing and the writing aesthetic of the internet are made. Critics have gone so far to call Wallace's *Infinite Jest* the first great "internet novel" (Bissel xii). While I do not attribute "firsts" to Wallace, I investigate these claims of Wallace's "internet style" that attempts to invite the collaboration and writing of readers. And this is largely apparent in the online *Infinite Jest* groups, in which readers write about their reading practices with the text, their feelings towards the text, and their interpretations of the text, all of which significantly shape the group's understanding of *Infinite Jest* and Wallace's work in general.

My critical media projects further illuminate the ways radio and the internet *afford* the kinds of intersubjectivity, the mobilization of affect, and the sharing of auto/biographical response that potentially create community. Throughout my dissertation, I use “affordance” and “constraints” to refer to what actions/activities a medium allows users to do or restricts users from doing. Donald Norman defines an affordance as “a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (11). Constraints restrict user actions and can be material, as in physical constraints, or cultural, as in learned, constraints (Norman 76). I draw attention to the affordances and constraints of radio, blogs, and the language of the texts that elicit auto/biographical response and communal interaction. As Aimée Morrison argues, “[i]n constructing our life stories...we are guided not only by the often-implicit discursive precedent of the genre in which we write or speak *but also by the material affordances and constraints of the objects through which we structure these stories of ourselves*” (“Facebook and Coaxed Affordances” 117; my emphasis). For the literary communities that organize themselves around the writings of Stein and Wallace, the material affordances of the literary text and technological medium (radio and blogs, respectively) afford the kinds of interaction, collaboration, and vulnerability that these authors sought to elicit from their readers.

### **Facilitating Relationality: The Vulnerability of Stein’s and Wallace’s Sincerity**

Yet, in both Stein’s and Wallace’s work that seeks to include others and othering through collaboration, there exists what Peters identifies as the “dualism of communication [at the turn of the Twentieth Century:] at once bridge and chasm” (5). That dualism encompasses the risk and vulnerability of communication. But more specific to Stein and Wallace is the risk of sincerity or sincere communication. Communication technologies were imagined as a means of connecting

to others at the same time as isolating others, teetering between the tensions of solipsism and “blissfully thin” connection (Peters 5). But that blissfully thin connection poses a risk of being dominated by an other or dominating another, especially in the work of Stein and Wallace. Thus, the “bridge” of communication is vulnerable in its relationality and runs the risk of being refused dialogic engagement from others; and the “chasm” of communication is the risk of vulnerability that prevents engagement and/or the fear that one cannot connect (a fear attributed to broadcasting). In Esposito’s delineation of Georges Bataille’s writing on community, he includes Bataille’s statement that “[w]ith temptation, if I can put it this way, we’re crushed by twin pincers of nothingness. By not communicating, we’re annihilated into the emptiness of an isolated life. By communicating we likewise risk being destroyed” (Bataille qtd in Esposito 121). Writing in response to the rise of fascism, Bataille recognizes two significant risks in communication: the risk of slipping into a solipsistic state, which is a state of emptiness and unfulfillment; or, the risk of being absorbed, defined, and dominated by the other. As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, fascist broadcasting and poetics asserted unidirectional, authoritative power over others, and Stein resists their poetics by incorporating dialogism, intimacy, and collaboration into her texts. To extend Bataille’s argument to Late Postmodernism, Brian Massumi, echoing Bataille, declares “*Capitalism is the global usurpation of belonging*” (Massumi 88). In chapter 4, I detail at length Wallace’s arguments that late capitalism’s promises of belonging encourage only passive engagement and ironic detachment. Wallace resists late capitalist logic by also including dialogism, intimacy, and collaboration into his aesthetics. Both Stein and Wallace incorporate sincerity into their poetics/aesthetics in order to address the risks of communication and foster the feeling of community through democratic participation.

But central to Stein's and Wallace's approaches to sincerity is not just addressing the risks of communication but to maintain that risk between author and reader(s). In Stein's and Wallace's work, the continuous presence of risk is what affords democratic participation, community, and relational identity formation. As Bataille argues, "'Communication' only takes place *between two people who risk themselves*, each lacerated and suspended, perched atop a common nothingness" (Bataille qtd in Esposito 122; original emphasis). The risk of communication is a risk that must be committed by both parties in order to achieve dialogism, intimacy, and collaboration. The tension of this risk accumulates into an affective intensity and establishes a community of others. As Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write, "Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon." (1; original emphasis). The potentiality of individuals to act and be acted upon within community is the affective vulnerability of community and the risk of communication. The vulnerability and risk of communication is central to the poetics of Stein and the aesthetics of Wallace: Stein and Wallace are known for their anxiety towards being a public figure and the risk of being defined by others in quotidian life. Wallace's work is excruciatingly aware of the other's/reader's presence and the vulnerability of communication, as well as being aware of the vulnerability of the other/reader. Stein's work resides within the risk of communication, strongly depending on the collaboration of her readers but is also decried as elitist and "difficult" or dismissed as "nonsense." Both Stein and Wallace play with the risk in communication in their writing, hoping that their readers will risk themselves in reading and creating meaning from their texts; that is, readers are affected to act upon the text.

The affective openness of vulnerability and the persistent risk in Stein's and Wallace's work connotes an ongoing process of collaboration. On one hand, Stein's texts often achieve



meaning through the agency of the reader and always remain open to a plurality of readers and the multiple meanings they can bring to the text. On the other hand, Wallace's texts are fragmentary, and often invite readers into extrapolating from the text and participating in seeing literature's connection to the real world. Their texts are always, in a sense, incomplete—always open to the participation of others. "Incompletion," Nancy argues, is community's "principle" (35) wherein incompleteness is figured "in an active sense...designating not insufficiency or lack, but the activity of sharing" (35). Incompleteness or openness affords relationality and contributes to the *désouevrement* of community: "It is not a matter of making, producing, or instituting a community; nor is it a matter of venerating or fearing within it a sacred power—it is a matter of incompleting its sharing. Sharing is always incomplete, or it is beyond completion and incompleteness. For a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared" (Nancy 35). Sharing literature and writing, especially auto/biographical literature/writing, is a means of keeping open that vulnerability; sharing ensures relationality and relationships instead of closing off relationality. In my critical media projects for my dissertation, the sharing of reading Stein illuminates the openness and plurality of Stein's texts more than simply reading Stein alone would. And in *Infinite Jest* online reading groups, participants share stories to connect with one another, often displaying a vulnerability to others in the group but also making the novel vulnerable to critique. The sharing within each critical media project—the radio installation for Stein, the online reading group for Wallace—unworks the texts of these authors to keep their text open, vulnerable, and plural.

### **Chapter Summaries: Feeling (for) Communities**

Because the dissertation deals with two time periods, I have dedicated two chapters to each period, Modernism and Late Postmodernism. The chapters are structured so that the writer

is first situated within the techno-cultural zeitgeist and with other writers' engagement with the emerging mass medium (Chapters 2 and 4). These chapters are then followed by a close analysis of one particular text, supplemented by a critical media project that concretizes the feelings of community within those particular texts and the materiality of radio (Chapter 3) and online reading group blogs (Chapter 5). While the focus on the two time periods means that the two halves can be read separately from one another, I have ensured a cohesion to the dissertation by interweaving statements that juxtapose the two periods throughout the chapters. I also want to stress that despite the chronological structuring of the chapters, I avoid making any teleological claims.

Chapter 2 situates Stein within the radio imaginaries of the Modernist soundscape. Throughout the chapter, I position her radio imaginary in comparison to the imaginaries of other Modernists, internationally. Although Stein was not introduced to radio until 1934, this chapter demonstrates that the orality/aurality of radio mutually emerges with the aural experimentation of her earlier career, reaching back to *Tender Buttons*, that created a space for communication and community through listening and shaping her audience "into readers who came to her writing...always open to the possibility of 'coming together'" (Chessman 8). While these texts are not radio broadcasts and do not directly and/or explicitly address radio, studies of radio and modernist writing, as Feldman et al. argue, should not be limited to recorded broadcasts but rather include writings of any sort related to the experience of radio or the radio imaginary ("Broadcasting in the Modernist Era" 4).

In this chapter, I focus on three texts of Stein's: *Tender Buttons*, *The Making of Americans*, and *Geography and Plays*. Each of these texts, I argue, represents an American radio imaginary of sincerity that employs dialogism and inclusivity, and each text is compared to other

popular imaginations of radio. In particular, *Tender Buttons* is compared to the “wireless imagination” of Marinetti; *The Making of Americans* is compared to the BBC’s radio imaginary and the Bloomsbury group’s resistance to the BBC’s imaginary; *Geography and Plays* is situated in the American radio imaginary, illuminating the poems that express the sincerity, inclusivity, and dialogism of the American radio imaginary. I demonstrate how the democratic poetics of Stein mutually emerges with the democratic imaginary of radio and how both Stein’s work and American radio defined itself against the Italian and British radio imaginaries and institutions. I argue that Stein reinvents Marinetti’s concept of “wireless imagination” from an authoritarian concept of command and control to a democratic concept of inclusion and plurality. I propose that Stein’s national project, *The Making of Americans*, shares a commonality with BBC’s national project, but altogether rejects grand unifying nationalism in favour for the fragmentary plurality of “incompleteness.” In her rejection of nationalism, Stein embraces a Bloomsbury attitude that prioritizes the wonderful pluralities of language that is gained through conversation and listening to others speak.

Chapter 3 claims *Everybody’s Autobiography* as an exemplary “radiotext”— a text that embodies and participates in the modernist radio soundscape, while also thinking (whether directly or indirectly) through the affects and effects of radio. I argue that radio plays a significant role in Stein’s rethinking of identity and the relationality of identity. Throughout most of her literary career, Stein views identity as relational but only on a one-to-one basis—*The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* is an example of Stein playing with this one-to-one relationality. But after her rise in popularity, as a result of the *Autobiography*, her tour of America, and her introduction to radio, Stein explores the radical relationality of identity beyond one-to-one in *Everybody’s Autobiography*. But rather than the book being a mere personal

experience of this radical relationality, she extends this “new” kind of relationality to “everybody,” identifying relational experience as an experience of modernity.

My close reading of *Everybody's Autobiography* is supplemented by my critical media project, a radio installation made with Stephen Trothen that we called “Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*.” The installation contains recordings of contributors reading from *Everybody's Autobiography* that people at the installation can tune channels from reader to reader to listen to the various readings. The installation foregrounds the orality of Stein's text while also grounding my claims about the aurality of Stein's text. As Shawna Ross argues about digital humanities and modernism, “more than simply a means to an end, our machines underwrite the reality of our scholarship. Their processes and outputs influence what emerges as knowable and what counts as proof” (1-2). While I do not identify closely with the term digital humanities, I do think her argument applies to the critical media projects of my dissertation. Altogether, this chapter puts forwards the argument that autobiographical acts for Stein becomes a means for everybody—not just herself—to maintain a sense of self (tied to language) and to negotiate and acknowledge the presence of others in the Modernist soundscape of heightened sociality. The simultaneous self-insistence and openness to others in Stein's work is at the core of her democratic poetics, which is foregrounded further by the collaboration of others that draw attention to the auralities/oralities of her work.

Chapter 4 leaps ahead to the early internet and puts early “cyberenthusiasts” in conversation with David Foster Wallace's writing. The leap forward is not a clean break; rather, throughout this chapter, I draw attention to the rhetorical similarities that the rhetoric of cyberenthusiasts and of Wallace resonate with the rhetoric of the American radio imaginary and Stein's democratic poetics, respectively. Moreover, throughout chapters 2 and 3 I point towards

these similarities that I develop further in this chapter. Wallace may not have used the internet extensively, yet his writing is constantly compared to the aesthetics of the internet. Even Bissel, in the 20th anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest*, argues that the novel is the first great internet novel. These claims, however, are not contextualized in the techno-historical literary moment. While Wallace never engaged with cyberenthusiasts, I demonstrate that they shared similar rhetoric that dreams of a dialogical communications medium—for cyberenthusiasts, it was the internet; for Wallace, it was literature. I select a series of Wallace's short stories and nonfiction writing to concrete these claims of Wallace's internet aesthetics. And then, I draw productive connections between Wallace's rhetoric of democracy and major cyberenthusiast figure Howard Rheingold's rhetoric of the internet's democratic potential.

When discussing Wallace and other writers of his generation, the terms postmodernism and “new sincerity” are often thrown around. However, in this chapter, I prefer to call the generation that Wallace belongs to “Late Postmodernism,” as their work builds upon the tradition of early Postmodern literature but with a different end goal. That end goal of Late Postmodernism, I demonstrate, is to establish an intersubjective connection with the reader, to emphasize literature's connection to the world, and to express a “wanting of affect” (to flip Jameson's characterization of Postmodernism as a “waning of affect”). In other words, Late Postmodernist writers seek strategies to write intersubjectivity into their texts and affectively move the reader to reflect on the world around them and their place in the world. The Late Postmodernist literary imaginary mutually emerges with computer-mediated-communication (CMC) imaginary of cyberenthusiasts, whose writings often characterize CMC as a collaborative form of literature and as intersubjective writing. And while “cyberspace” was seen as bodiless at the time, I draw attention to the contradictions in their writing that definitely allude to the

screen's connection to the real world. I conclude this chapter by analyzing the similar rhetoric of democracy and sincerity in Wallace's "Authority and American Usage" and Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community*. Together, Wallace shares with cyberenthusiasts an optimistic, yet white, male, and privileged, hope in the written word's capacity of creating authentic human connection through the vulnerability and openness of sincerity, and thereby establishing a community of others.

While Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is the primary text of chapter 5, the focus of the chapter is an *Infinite Jest* online reading group, *Infinite Summer*. *Infinite Summer* was a blog, with twitter and goodreads accounts and a Facebook group, that ran during the summer of 2009. The group gathered approximately 1100 participants and gained quite a lot of media attention. While I do contextualize my arguments on *Infinite Summer* with analyses of *Infinite Jest*, *Infinite Summer* is my focus because of the auto/biographical narratives that are foregrounded by the blog format. In fact, I seriously consider *Infinite Summer* as a part of *Infinite Jest*. Reading *Infinite Jest* in an online reading group is not just reading *Infinite Jest*, but also reading the blog posts of the online reading group. The text of the blog becomes a part of the reading experience with *Infinite Jest*. The auto/biographical narratives of *Infinite Summer* importantly intersect with the themes and characters of the novel. *Infinite Jest*'s themes of mental health, addiction, and managing the pressures of a late capitalist society are explored in the auto/biographical narratives of the blog. Indeed, there is discussion of the novel, but these discussions are often framed auto/biographically, or the blog posts and comments feature exclusively auto/biographical disclosures.

While the study of *Infinite Summer* may have been enough, I also decided to run my own online *Infinite Jest* reading group blog as a critical media project in order to better understand the

affect of participating and managing an *Infinite Jest* online reading group. With the help of three other volunteers, I founded and managed *Poor Yoricks' Summer* throughout the summer of 2016. The guides who posted alongside me—Allie, Shazia, and Joe—also provided answers to a questionnaire on their experiences. Our posts, along with their answers, illuminate the affective vulnerability that the novel coaxes in these reading groups. Further, I identify two kinds of auto/biographical narratives that emerge: Affirmational Auto/biography, auto/biographical disclosures or narratives that identifies with the novel; and Oppositional Auto/biography, auto/biographical disclosures or narratives that challenge or are unable to identify with the novel. These two auto/biographical tendencies are constantly in tension with each other in *Infinite Jest* reading groups, and both are essential, I argue, in maintaining the feeling of community, or else the group just falls into sameness.

Altogether, I follow Zizi Papacharissi, who argues “[a]ll media are social” (309), or at least have the potential to be social or facilitate social formations. My dissertation reveals the threats to and promises of community in twentieth-century American mass media, the manifestation of these tensions of community in American literature, and the auto/biographical writing that these authors and/or their readers participate in when navigating their respective mass mediated environments. In fact, in the conclusion of my dissertation I gesture towards the current popularization of autofiction in literature around the world, but especially in American literature. Avoiding a teleological argument, I position autofiction as a means of sincerity and as a significant means of navigating the emerging mass media environment and the dominant techno-culture. Autofiction and sincerity are not just one-dimensional concepts but are contextually various according to race, gender, technology, and dominant/emerging culture. Auto-fiction may be popularized now, but my dissertation illuminates other approaches to

literature, especially Modernist and Late Postmodernist literature, that reveal important auto/biographical acts that engage with the techno-culture of the time period.



## Chapter 2: Stein, Radio, and the Modernist Soundscape: Democratizing Sonic Modernity

### Transnational Wireless Imagination(s)

This chapter navigates the mutual history of modernist literature and radio in order to foreground Gertrude Stein and the democratic potential she and other Americans saw in radio. I argue that Stein contributes to the American radio imaginary—an imagination of radio informed by social, political, and national contexts (Campbell xiii)—or “wireless imagination” in American literature by affectively adapting the “transcendent sociality” (Halliday 58) of the Modernist soundscape towards democratic feeling and/or sociability that is felt amongst listeners/readers and speakers/authors. By “democratic feeling,” I mean the feeling of a deliberative and pluralistic conception of culture and language that invites contribution and collaboration. The orality/aurality of Stein’s writing is informed by an American sense of sincerity, which in Stein’s case is enabled by textual grammar that invites readers to participate in the text orally and contribute to meaning of the text through the uniqueness, embodiment, and relationality of the reader’s voice. Stein’s work and the orality/aurality it elicits *mutually emerges* with American protocols for radio, wherein protocols “include a vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions, which gather and adhere like a nebulous array around a technological nucleus” (Gitelman 7). Protocols “express a huge variety of social, economic, and material relationships” (Gitelman 8); they are never static and vary according to social, economic, material, and, I’ll add, literary relationships. The American radio imaginary in the Modernist era included protocols that elicited *feelings* of dialogism and participation, relationality and

intimacy, just as Stein and other American writers were incorporating these feelings in their work. But these mutual protocols of American Modernist writing and radio developed from and defined themselves against other national and ideological radio imaginaries, which sought to divert, suppress, or circumvent dialogism, participation, relationality, and intimacy.

What is mutually “American” in American radio and in the work of American Modernists is a profound sense of localism that is bound with voice and identity. The localism of the American radio imaginary emphasizes sound as auto/biographical and creates a democratic feeling that is embodied in oral/aural localities and in the speaker. The localist approach to sound and voice in the work of Modernist American authors exhibits Adriana Cavarero’s philosophy of vocal expression. Cavarero, building from the work of Hannah Arendt and Jean-Luc Nancy, argues for “the vocal phenomenology of uniqueness” (7). The uniqueness of the voice is “embodied” (9) and relational: “what it communicates first and foremost...is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices” (13). For Cavarero, speech is an action that manifests the embodied, relational uniqueness of the individual because “speaking is an interlocution with others and requires a reciprocity of speech and listening” (175). Moreover, following Arendt, Cavarero argues that speech is political, understanding politics as interaction and a “sharing of a common space” that is created by that interaction (204). Within this “antipatriarchal” (207) notion of the voice as embodied, unique, and relational, Cavarero believes that there is democratic potential in the voice because it challenges the “universalizing promises of the global” (204). American Modernists, particularly Stein, privilege the local and

the uniqueness of the vocal in their work because it challenges the universalizing and homogenizing promises of the “grand narrative” fascist and imperialist logic within Modernism (Lyotard). In Stein’s work, specifically, aural/orality opens up a sharing of a common space that affords uniqueness *and* relationality.

Central to this chapter is Stein’s earlier work leading up to *Everybody’s Autobiography*, which I discuss in the next chapter as the exemplar “radiotext” of Stein’s work. The select texts of my focus are *Tender Buttons* (1914), *The Making of Americans* (written between 1903-1911, revised in the 1920s, and published in 1925), and *Geography and Plays* (1922). Sara Wilson states that her critical examination of radio as a “formal model” for Stein’s later writing can lend to further critical investigations “of connecting Stein’s early aural experimentation” to radio (107). Thus, I find it productive and useful to think of Stein’s early writing as exhibiting an American sensibility of the “wireless imagination”—a poetics coined by the Futurists but, as I demonstrate in this chapter, manifests differently in Stein’s work. This chapter introduces a nuance to the wireless imagination, decentering the Futurists as the origins of the radio imaginary and placing Stein (and others) in conversation. Moreover, I suggest that these wireless imaginations are informed by and/or contribute to national ideologies. Each of Stein’s texts that I have chosen employs the American conception of sincerity developed by Louis Zukofsky and plays with localism, intimacies between author and reader, and dialogism. These traits are reminiscent of the affective “liveness” of radio, the listeners’ active participation in the meaning making of the (radio)text, the use of sincerity in orality/aurality, and the relationality of active

listening of radio that is intertwined with the “I”. Stein, I argue, demands active listening rather than passive hearing in order to evoke relationality and affect from her text. As Susan Douglas argues, “Passive hearing, which is a kind of automatic processing, rarely becomes intertwined with what the ‘I’ is thinking or doing; active listening almost always does” (27). Stein participates in and contributes to the localism, intimacy, and dialogism that defines the American Modernist soundscape. Her wireless imagination is part of an American radio imaginary that upholds democratic participation, inclusivity, and intimacy through the action of listening and speaking that her work demands from readers.

My understanding of the “Modernist soundscape” takes into account the way in which sound is both imagined and shaped by physical environments in Modernist literature. I consider the materiality and composition of the text as a physical environment that shapes, imagines, and is shaped by sound. Specifically, I understand “soundscape” as Emily Thompson defines it: “simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world” (117). Figured in this way, Stein’s writing is a means of—a composition for—making sense and perceiving the world of the modernist soundscape. Stein’s texts are very much a world of their own, appearing to be hermetically sealed; but, contrary to criticism that only sees Stein’s text as hermetically sealed, it is also a cultural work constructed to make sense of the world. Further, I find that Sam Halliday’s concept of “sonic modernity” is beneficial for my understanding of the Modernist soundscape. Halliday defines “sonic modernity” as being characterized by a “now-ness” (16) and

a heightened or “transcendent *sociality*,” an awareness of others’ presence but without visual accompaniment<sup>6</sup> (58; original emphasis). The transcendent sociality of sonic modernity gave Modernist writers a greater awareness of others far beyond their local proximities and forms of belonging or identification. But this affective “shock...experience of sound” in sonic modernity caused Modernist writers to manage that transcendent sociality into forms or systems of belonging to or identification with an ideology. (Halliday 30.) Thus, *how* sociality is *heard* by writers is important precisely because *hearing is a politics of sociability*. As Halliday notes, “Hearing...is oppositional, insofar as it implies a form of politics” (7). Or, as Jonathan Sterne argues, “Hearing requires positionality” (4 “Sonic Imaginations”). The various writers and their work in this chapter demonstrate the ways in which their writing politicizes the Modernist soundscape, the kinds of sociability that their work imagines, and the positionalities their work are situated in when interpreting the sounds of modernity.

A comparison between two definitions of radio illuminates that the sociality of radio is politically inscribed by a cultural imagination of radio’s “sociability.” Susan Douglas writes, “[r]adio has worked most powerfully inside our heads, helping us create internal maps of the world and our place in it, urging us to construct imagined communities to which we do, or do not, belong” (5). In contrast, Timothy Campbell describes radio in his study of Italian radio as means of defining fascism: “fascism, as a mode of wireless transmission, maximizes dispatches

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<sup>6</sup> This is what Pierre Schaeffer calls “acousmatic.” Halliday describes acousmatic as “any sound heard without accompanying visual impressions of its cause or source” (Halliday 13). Other traits of sonic modernity include sound capture and inscription of all sounds.

to enlist bodies for warfare” (131). He elaborates, “[i]n the broken feedback loop of consciousness created by the wireless-gramophone hookup, the wireless is the announcer or dictator who speaks but does not hear himself, while the rest take dictation without being able to speak” (169). Douglas’s definition, on the one hand, is dialogic and grants agency to the listener, putting more emphasis on the listener than the speaker. The listener is urged to *construct* and imagine the *plurality of communities* in which they do *and* do not belong. Campbell’s definition, on the other hand, is one directional, a *broken* feedback loop: listeners are defined and grouped by the speaker, having no agency other than to take down and follow the words of the speaker. And the speaker is disconnected from his words being unable to hear themselves.

These two definitions of radio reveal a tension in cultural imaginations and protocols of radio around the world and illustrate that hearing is political, informed by and situated within ideological formations. Within the transcendent sociality of modernity, there are affective potentials of sociability, feelings that drive a sociality towards a sociability. As Halliday points out, “Sound is not, I think, intrinsically any more or less social than any other object of sensation, but that it *is* social is attested both by its mediation and potentiation of peoples’ interactions with each other, and by its giving these interactions sensuous, objective forms” (53). Radio’s sociabilities result from the mediation and potentiation of peoples’ interactions with each other and with the radio. Thus, I position Stein in relation to her Modernist contemporaries and their imaginations and uses of radio to elucidate the complexities and American sensibilities of Stein’s wireless imagination. Although Stein was an ex-pat, she does identify herself as distinctly

American within Europe in the ways that she hears sonic modernity as pluralistic and dialogic. How she hears sonic modernity differs from how her other contemporaries heard sonic modernity, particularly those in Italy and in Britain for the scope of this chapter. Indeed, there are even nuances between American writers and how they hear sonic modernity; that is, how their hearing reflects certain positionalities. It is useful, as Hilmes argues about radio broadcasting, to consider “the inherent *transnationalism* of broadcasting's cultural economy: constituted by both the demands of the nation and the equally compelling impulse to go beyond, to provide a conduit to speak to other nations and to let other influences stream into the national space” (*Networked Nations* 2; original emphasis). Stein’s sense of sonic modernity and her place within it is illuminated by including the national demands and “other influences” outside of the national space that shape or “stream into” the American radio imaginary.

Early American radio and Modernist American writers adopt a dialogical aesthetic informed by sincerity that works toward inclusivity, particularly within American orality/aurality, and defines individual identity as fundamentally relational given the blurring of public/private boundaries that radio introduced. While this claim threatens to be an over-generalization of Modernist American writers, it does serve as an umbrella claim for the various forms of American literature that sought to incorporate American voices, oral cultures, and folklore into their texts from William Carlos Williams, Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner, Lordine Niedecker, and Stein to the Harlem Renaissance and “proletariat” writers of the 1920s and 1930s. Jessica Berman, writing specifically on American “proletarian” literature, asserts,

“they share much with Harlem Renaissance texts, which mount as broad critique of the expectations of literary realism by emphasizing folkways, oral cultures, and the process by which cultural and ‘linguistic outsiders’ can disrupt social and narrative conventions” (250).<sup>7</sup> Extending Berman’s argument further, “linguistic outsiders” were beginning to be established by radio; resistance to standardized conventions (and policing) of voice within American radio and literature is a means of disrupting the radio imaginary of American sonic modernity. Under the influence of British broadcasting, which was standardized under a nationalist agenda, American radio began attempts to standardize across the nation (see Hilmes, *Networked Nations*). Despite Theodor Adorno’s elitist critiques of radio and his fears towards the standardization of 1930s American radio—a process in mass media that he and Max Horkheimer called “the culture industry”—there were many resistances to this standardization. For instance, Emily Westkaemper points out that in light of the increasing standardized national identity in commercial broadcasting, “radio[, nevertheless,] presented diverse perspectives on women’s historical significance” (77). Susan Douglas, providing an alternative (but retrospective) viewpoint to Adorno’s, does point out that “[e]ven in 1930...there was still not one ‘mass’ audience...Rather, there were many listening publics with ongoing, warring ideas about how to listen and what to listen to” (79). As Douglas suggests, a sense of localism was maintained across radio stations and programs in the face of standardization and cultural homogenization.

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<sup>7</sup> Berman does not develop this comparison extensively, her focus being mainly on proletarian literature. Yet, this comparison begs further work. See Chapter 6 for my intention to move forward with this work.



Stein also strives for that strong sense of localism in her writing, resisting the standardization she was listening in to.

The trajectory of this chapter first establishes the “democratic” wireless imagination of sincerity and the unique relationality of the voice in American radio, Modernist writing, and in Stein’s *Geography & Plays*. I then juxtapose the American radio imaginary of Stein’s “wireless imagination” in *Tender Buttons* with F.T. Marinetti’s concept of the “wireless imagination,” noting the similarities but especially the significant differences in order to demonstrate that the origins and definitions of the “wireless imagination” are complex and do not belong solely to the Futurists. Turning to the British, I discuss the nationalist “democratic” dissemination of culture that resonates with Marinetti’s fascism, and the British Bloomsbury group, who resisted the standardization in British radio in order to foster conversation and whose aesthetics bear a resemblance to American sincerity.<sup>8</sup> This aural nationalist impulse appears in Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, which aurally recognizes the failure of the Modernist grand narrative and the pluralities and relationality that this failure invites. The following sections—“American Chaos,” “The Italian Wireless,” and the “The British National Imperative”—thus put these

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<sup>8</sup>. An absent presence is Canadian radio. Although Hilmes notes that a Canadian, along with an American, invented the means of transmitting voices rather than just morse code through the aether, the relationship between American and Canadian radio is understudied. Hilmes puts more emphasis on the relationship between British and American competition and tensions, but admits that this is only her focus for her book. In my own research on Stein and radio, Canadian radio is not present.

tensions of cultural imaginations of radio together in order to illuminate Stein's place within sonic modernity.

### **Stein Amidst American Chaos: Relationality and Space in *Geography & Plays***

Although the big radio boom was in the early 1920s, Americans had been acquainted with radio for far longer than the British because “radio experimentation was not interrupted by war as it was in Europe” (Hilmes 31). The British characterization of American radio as “chaos” was, as Hilmes points out, directed towards its commercialization and the out-of-control licensing. But many Americans felt that governmental control over a mass medium such as the radio was “detrimental to democracy and contrary to First Amendment freedoms,” an argument that will resurface with the Internet (Hilmes 32). The formation of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in 1919 was America's attempt to impose governmental control and nationalize the production of radios and radio programs just as the BBC and The Postal Service did in 1922. But, as Hilmes argues, “by 1919 in the United States radio *broadcasting*, as distinct from radio technology, had already slipped the bounds of both state and corporation and thrived as a field of fiercely defended individual experimentation” (33). Although the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) adopted a similar model to the British, and the Federal Radio Commission (FRC)<sup>9</sup> enforced stricter legislation on licensing, American radio never got as centralized as the BBC.

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<sup>9</sup>. Established in 1927 and later became the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) after the Communications Act was passed in 1934 so that it could also cover television.

The “chaos” of the amateurs—known as “hams”—highly influenced the imaginary of radio’s democratic potential because of the localism and individual agency they strived for. As Hilmes notes, “America’s amateurs, numbering over a million by 1922, must be counted as originators of some of the basic characteristics of radio broadcasting itself, from its localized base, to its independent informal spirit, to much of the content that would soon become the standard fare of a professionalized media sphere” (36). Amateur radio and local radio stations still maintained a sense of localism over nationalism, and yet this localism was an American expression of nationalism. Despite the attempts by the American government to gain control over the American ether, “the forces of national unity and centralization in the United States would always have to work within a framework of cultural diversity, political decentralization, and the persistence of the local in broadcasting” (Hilmes 66).

The democratic spirit that the American “hams” adopted and fought for began early on with the establishment of the American Radio Relay League (ARRL) in 1914 by Hiram Percy Maxim and Clarence Tuska. As early as 1921, the ARRL argued for a “Citizen Wireless” in an editorial (qtd in Hilmes 33). If the “wireless” in the “wireless imagination” of Marinetti and Italian Fascist broadcasting connoted authority and authoritative power, the “wireless” in the “wireless imagination” of the ARRL connoted a freedom of expression and agency of the American citizen. The “Citizen Wireless” engaged in conversation between *everyday citizens*. The notion of a “Citizen Wireless” stresses broadcasting as a means of local and unique expression representative of the locality which the individual is part of; the “Citizen Wireless” is

a sender *and* a receiver, part of a network. Within “The Amateur’s Code”—a text produced by the ARRL in 1926—there is an acknowledgement of and respect for others and others’ needs, while also stressing the community of the ham and the ham’s duty to their country (*The Amateur Radio Handbook*). The values of “cooperation” and “consideration” are not only those of the “amateur spirit” but also of a “democratic spirit,” which will be echoed in the rhetoric of cyberenthusiast Howard Rheingold and in the writings of David Foster Wallace in Chapter 4 and 5. The American soundscape, at least as it was imagined, became localist in its nationalism, afforded individual expression and identity (for example, the call sign), and upheld dialogue and an ethics that acknowledged and respected others.

I must, however, make an important acknowledgement regarding the inclusivity and diversity of the American ether. Douglas, Hilmes, and Timothy D. Taylor do point out that despite the claims of diversity and inclusivity of American radio, the reality of the airwaves was very white and male. Douglas writes that “[r]adio was hardly an unfettered vehicle for the democratic expression of diverse American voices” (6). And Taylor points out that if jazz were heard on the radio it was mostly played by white musicians (247). The idea of black Americans “entering” the homes of white Americans raised complaints from white American families. And yet, despite these racial prejudices made and implemented into the protocols of radio, Americans still felt that American radio was the most democratic. In a National Association of Broadcasters 1933 pamphlet, entitled “Broadcasting in the United States,” American Broadcasting is pitted against the “homogeneity” of the BBC: “There is not [in the BBC] the marked diversity in racial,

cultural, social and economic backgrounds which one finds in the United States...the many races which have gone to make up our nation have a right to programs ministering to their racial consciousness, for each of them brought something of great value to the evolution of the American character” (qtd in Hilmes 76-77). But contrary to these sentiments, “many races” in this historical context most likely refers to European races such as Irish, Jewish, German, Italian, and so on. On one hand this was seen as progressive, but on the other hand it still continued and indirectly validated the appropriation and barring of Black American voices and musicians who did not have the right to programs that “minister” to their racial consciousness and who did not receive recognition for their contribution to the “American character.” As Jennifer Lynn Stoeber argues, “The rise of standardized radio speech and state-sponsored color blindness subjected racialized groups to new forms of aural body...[T]hose that would not (or could not) conform to white sonic norms risked not only increased discrimination but the blame for it too” (231)

Indeed, these imaginations and memories of inclusive American radio may have their roots before the networks increasingly imposed standardization and censorship, although it is not entirely clear how inclusive American radio was pre-1926 when the Radio Act was passed.<sup>10</sup>

Black musicians like Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, and the Mills Brothers did enjoy popularity on American radio before and after 1926, and Jack Cooper originated one of the first shows

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<sup>10</sup>. Hilmes’ *Radio Voices* provides an excellent study of women in radio pre- and post-Radio Act, however. Hilmes states, “Evidence shows that women participated actively in amateur radio, from set building to DXing to occupying professional positions as wireless operators” (132). Further, she adds, “[w]omen in fact invented and sustained some of broadcasting’s most central innovations” (132).

directed at a black audience in 1929, *The All-Negro Hour*, on WSBC in Chicago (Hilmes, *Radio Voices* 272). Stoever notes that W.E.B. DeBois “considered the radio a potential avenue of self-presentation and social change” (257); that is, “[u]ntil the Depression, when radio networks consolidated and almost totally whitened America’s airwaves” (Stoever 257). Hilmes and Stoever both note the efforts in resisting and being aware of this nation-wide standardization, drawing attention to the ways American broadcasters during the 1930s refused “to speak white imagined ‘Negro dialect’” (Stoever 259) and developed reading styles that added semantic nuances to radio scripts in order ‘to subvert institutional and social control’ (Hilmes *Radio Voices* 121). These nuances included localist dialect, slang, resisting aural stereotypes, and the uniqueness of the radio speakers’ voice. But, there were also blackface programs, like *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, which established a “dialect as a marker of blackness,” situating a standard of whiteness and all Other dialects to be parodied (Wilson 274). In response, Wilson notes, “figures like [Walter] White, [Langston] Hughes and [Richard] Wright undermined this aural regime by self-identifying as black while not sounding like either Amos or Andy” (274-275). The attempts at standardization, exclusion, and censoring by the American networks were attempts at aurally establishing a national white standard. But a consistent presence of minority and/or localist expressions that occurred on and off air challenged and resisted this standardization and parody of the Other. Thus, the American ether in the Modernist period was a site of struggle between aural/oral exclusivity and inclusivity fundamentally tied to identity and identity politics.

In her writing, Stein works towards an inclusivity that is founded within the orality and aural of her work. The inclusivity of Stein's work is established by the reader coming to her work with their voice; and the "reader" is not a general reader, as they often are in reader response theory, but an individual in a certain space and time. For Stein, to be American—having an American sensibility—is embracing a here-and-now-ness, a space of time that acknowledges difference and establishes identity as relational and contextually embodied. In the "Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," Stein writes,

I am always trying to tell this thing that a space of time is a natural thing for an American to always have inside them as something in which they are continuously moving...it is something strictly American to conceive a space that is filled with moving, a space of time that is filled always filled with moving and my first real effort to express this thing which is an American thing began in writing  
The Making of Americans. (160-1)

What Stein describes as "a space of time" is an affective intensity located within a particular space and time; it recognizes that an individual and a locality is always moving in the sense of change and in the sense of containing emotional and physical factors that contribute to its here-and-now-ness. As Paul A. Kottman writes in his introduction to Cavarero's *For More Than One Voice*, "Every utterance is moreover an action, which at once manifests one's embodied uniqueness to others in the context of a material, ontological relation here and now" (xxi). This conception of "a space of time" as that which stresses locality (difference) and presentness

(uniqueness) is distinctly a product of the American radio imaginary. In Stein's writing, the here-and-now is a means of manifesting the dialogical relationship between readers and the text of the author, acknowledging the reciprocity of the reader and the intimacy that this here-and-nowness conveys.

This dialogical relationship which acknowledges the reciprocity between reader, text/medium, and author and conveys an intimacy of the here-and-now is a literary *and* a radio technique known as sincerity, a term that is not often associated with Stein to describe her writing. Louis Zukofsky, an American poet, introduced the concept of sincerity to American writing as it is understood in twentieth-century American literature in his essay "Sincerity and Objectification." In this essay, Zukofsky privileges the interrelatedness of sincerity and objectification rather than the conventional use of sincerity as an expression of the poet's genuine feeling. He argues, "In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody" (273). Sincerity, for Zukofsky, must be situated and embodied, while acknowledging the mediation of these various embodiments; it provides an understanding of writing as a craft, acknowledging the way the poet feels, sees, and hears the world in their writing while also seeking to acknowledge that the reader feels, sees, and hears the world differently. As Zukofsky elaborates in a later essay, "the work of poets who see with their ears, hear with their eyes, move with their noses and speak and breathe with their feet"



(Zukofsky, “An Objective” 17). Not only must a poet write with their body, the senses and sensualities of the body must be in conversation with and aware of each other. By extension, the poet must be aware of the senses and sensualities of another. Although Zukofsky does not mention the reader, I believe that Stein, while writing with her body, is also aware of the bodies of others that come to her texts.

This attention to the situatedness and embodiment of the reader and the poet affords what Zukofsky calls “objectification”: “the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object...or affects the mind as such” (274). The poet must come to terms that writing is a mediation of and interaction with the world, and so the poet must sincerely draw attention to the dialogical relationship between poet, the text, the world, and readers. The acknowledgement of mediation takes into account the *materiality* of writing and the world.<sup>11</sup> The awareness of and attention to mediation mutually emerges with mass media’s mediation and concerns of sincerity. For instance, while Edna St. Vincent Millay is not an objectivist poet, Lesley Wheeler points out that she, too, demonstrates the “illusion” and mediation of both print and radio (238). Wheeler also notes that Millay’s own broadcasts “capitalize on the increasing association of radio voices with sincerity but also help to bolster that association” (252). Thus, sincerity is not just an expression of genuine feeling, but also accounts for the material affordances and constraints of a medium and of the world that mediates these expressions of

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<sup>11</sup>. A Modernist scholar and a friend of mine once defined Modernism to me in conversation as such: “Modernism is Romanticism plus Materialism.”

genuine feeling. The import of sincerity in an environment saturated in mass media is also a concern of Wallace's, as chapters four and five will argue. Zukofsky's addition of objectification to sincerity acknowledges that writing affects the individual mind (of *both* poet *and* reader) as such; it is a means of making writing as "objectified" enough for the reader to recognize its mediation and to also contribute to the work through their affective responses and their situated embodiment.

Since sincerity is a means of getting as close to the world as it is experienced by the poet while acknowledging poetry's mediation and the reciprocity between readers and author, then it conveys an intimacy with the world in which the poet is living that the reader feels and is intimate with. Douglas points out that "Sincerity is absolutely crucial" in radio, precisely because it created intimacy between listeners and speakers despite being invisible to each other (133). While Douglas does not refer to Zukofsky's notion of sincerity, and the kinds of sincerity on radio is not the same as the poetry of the objectivists, they both share a materialist and dialogic notion of sincerity that emerged in the twentieth century with the arrival of mass media technologies. Zukofsky's notion of sincerity and radio's sincerity employ techniques that acknowledges the mediation of media and works within their constraints to create an intimacy with the world, and thereby creating intimacy with readers/listeners. On the air but also on the page, the use of everyday speech, neologisms, and/or aurally punning contributes to this sense of intimacy because it demands active listening, which requires individual meaning to be created from a broadcast for a mass audience. As Timothy Taylor argues, "the biggest change wrought

by radio that continues to affect listeners today concerns the transformation of intimacy” (247). Taylor points out that this kind of intimacy on the radio transformed singing styles and introduced “crooning,” a “softer style of singing,” as the result of the technological constraints that prevented other styles of singing—operatic, Broadway, and vaudeville—that were “too loud” (250). What is significant about Taylor’s observations is that crooning and the use of sincerity blurred the public and private boundaries by taking something public (a mass medium address) and making it private. The writing techniques of sincerity—common speech, aural/oral punning, the admittance of failure, the awareness of mediation—is a similar constraint as it is in radio, a technique employed by American writers like Stein, Lorine Niedecker, Zora Neal Hurston, William Carlos Williams, and William Faulkner, in order to make the writing’s publication intimate, local, and dialogical.

The poems in Stein’s *Geography and Plays* point to two important factors of American writers’ radio imaginary and the role of sincerity in that imaginary. That aural/orality is auto/biographical in the sense that one can know someone by listening to them, and that this aural/orality creates intimacy and leads to the possibilities of community. After writing *The Making of Americans*, Stein’s focus shifted from thinking of a national wholistic way of writing, as the novel had set out to be, to a more localized, fragmented way of writing. Stein embraces the fragmentation and localization that she began to discover partway through *The Making of Americans* because it embraces the plurality and the actual varying use of words among individuals, expressing a democratic poetics. As a result, Stein’s writing turned to sincerity,

which both embraced this fragmentation of plurality and demanded the reader to make meaning out of her writing. As Juliana Spahr argues, Stein's work "does not deny authority but instead advocates its dispersal (decentralization), a dispersal that relies on the multiple possibilities and interpretations distributed among different readers, and one that has, literally, to do with not knowing the language" (44). Grammar and imposed, static meanings are what hold back words and "restrict agency" (Spahr 45). Stein's work exhibits what Virginia Woolf calls "craftsmanship" of herself as author *but also of the reader, as co-author*, who creates meaning out of the text. To alter Ulla Dydo's argument about the "voice of the composition," "the voice of a work is not the personal, expressive voice of the author but the articulating voice of the composition [*being read by the reader*]" (22). Dydo argues that Stein's "words are centripetal, pointing inward, to the piece" but they also *draw* the reader inward as well (23).

*Geography and Plays* importantly puts into practice a more localized and fragmentary approach to language because of its focus on geography and the local variations these geographies produce. In "The King or Something (The Public Is Invited to Dance)," Stein invites readers to hear their own reading and to come to her writing with their voices. Early in the poem, she writes, "I hear a noise," followed by a plurality of voices entering the text (122). The noise she hears is not dismissed or met with anxiety; the noise is invited into the text and listened to. The voices of the "noise" demand "[I]isten to me when I speak./ Because I speak," asking readers to acknowledge others speaking because they speak, because they have a voice demonstrative of their uniqueness (125). This recognition is reminiscent of the Bloomsbury

group's emphasis on conversation and an ethics of reciprocation that leads to connection. Or, as Spahr writes about Stein: "Her works do not emphasize community but rather that which makes community work: communication" (47). In the "The King or Something," Stein writes, "Come Connect Us/ Lead him to me/ Come to me easily./ Come to me there and tell me about speeches./ Speeches and my cousin" (131). The "come" suggests becoming public to hear people and their language, their use or "craftsmanship" of words. Recognizing the plurality of language use leads to recognizing them as "cousin" or as kindred; that is, listening to others exposes one to other uses of the same language, of which should not be rejected as "improper" but rather accepted as familial, as what Dydo calls the "possibility of voice" (22). "The King or Something" is exemplar of Stein's attempts to "push us to hear, see, and connect words in new ways in a new verbal world of perceptions" introduced by sonic modernity (Dydo 19). Stein asks her readers to reject any authority over language and notion of language as static and to be open to the fluidity (coming) and plurality (possibility/"something") of speech.

The publication of *Geography and Plays* received criticism, some of which was misogynistic and attacked its literary merit.<sup>12</sup> But Stein's contemporaries defended Stein, and the arguments they make are important for understanding Stein's work and her contribution to the

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<sup>12</sup> In Kenneth Burke's 1923 review of the book in the *Dial*, he compares Stein to Milton and uses this comparison to justify that she is not canonical because she is not as skillful as Milton; he also laments that she "ignore[s]" the "quality in the literary man's medium" (408). The basis for Burke's criticism is that she is not as good as men are and she ignores the rules set out by men. Burke misses the fact that it is this very "ignorance" or "dismissal" of patriarchal rules that others praise in Stein's writing. See also Pulsifer who dismisses Stein's *G&P* as nonsense. Leo Stein and B.L. Reid describe Stein's work as "infantile" (see Spahr 33).

American soundscape and the American soundscape itself. Two essays by Mina Loy and William Carlos Williams, in particular, address Stein's work and her contribution to the Modernist soundscape. In both of their essays, two significant principles emerge on the work of Stein: 1) democracy as localism, and 2) aural/oral epistemology, which are co-dependent. In Loy's essay, she argues that Stein's work has "'Being' as the absolute occupation" (432). The occupation of Being in Stein's work is located within her efforts to give unique expression to the use of words; it is the use of words that define the Being of an individual. Language use can be auto/biographical.<sup>13</sup> In elucidating this statement, Loy points to Stein's "Italians" in *Geographies & Plays*: "The most perfect example of this method is *Italians* where not only are you pressed close to the insistence of their existence, but Gertrude Stein through her process of reiteration gradually, progressively rounds them out, decorates them with their biological insignia" (432; original emphasis). Loy points to Stein's attention to language, which is a kind of listening that Michel Chion calls "reduced listening." Eric Baus, whose definition I prefer over Chion's, defines "reduced listening" as "a kind of intense, focused perceptual investigation that temporarily de-emphasizes other concerns while it lets in previously unacknowledged qualities" (n.p.) Baus continues, "One of the ways of achieving 'reduced' listening is through repetition...[repetition] accumulates a palpable sediment that we can observe, explore, and

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<sup>13</sup>. Dydo argues that her book, *The Language that Rises*, looks at Stein's work "as a single spiritual autobiography whose vocabulary is generated by the daily life but whose voice is uniquely hers" (7). If Stein's work is approached as containing an autobiographical vocabulary formed by the relationality of daily life, then I argue to consider her work as also coaxing out of her readers an autobiographical vocabulary shaped by their daily life in their locality while still preserving the uniqueness of their voice.

eventually integrate into our understanding of the work's meaning and its social contexts" (n.p.)

The "reduced listening" of Stein's repetition, as Loy suggests, gradually rounds out the people she is writing about; her words become *biographical*.

The choice of "Italians" by Loy is interesting because the poem is concerned more than any other geography in *Geography and Plays* with sound as an identifier. Early in the poem, Stein writes, "They are talking, often talking and they are doing things with pieces of them while they are talking and they are then sounding like something, they are then certainly sounding in a way that is a way that is a natural way for them to be sounding, they are having noise come out of them" ("Italians" 47). The "noise" may be Stein's incomprehension of the Italian language, yet she acknowledges that the sound of their talking is natural to them, that it sounds like something, although that "something" is not entirely clear to Stein. Despite Stein's incomprehension, she continues to listen and pay attention to their talking, noticing that their talking coincides with "doing things with pieces of them," that their actions and their body ("pieces of them") are uniquely tied to their talking. This significantly recalls Cavarero's notion of voice being embodied and contextual, that "[s]peaking, which is first of all a labor of phonation, is rooted in the labyrinths of the body" (65). Stein reinforces Cavarero's notion throughout the poem, writing later, "There are very many being existing who are ones who are talking quite often and they are sounding as they are looking, as they are acting, as they are being" (52). Further, she adds, "All of them are ones completely expressing feeling everything. All of them are ones expressing feeling anything" (58). By paying attention to the sounding of

their talking, Stein incrementally builds an understanding of the (auto)biography of their language, beginning with the intertwining of language and appearance (“looking”), then language and bodily movements (“acting”), language and their way of living life (“being”) and the expressions of their being (“feeling”).

Thus far, however, the poem appears to be national: it is called “Italians” and the above quotations are focused on a generic “they.” But differences emerge in “Italians” as Stein continues to listen, noting (not explicitly) the dialects of the Italian language. Stein writes, “There are many of them completely different from any other one of them...and this is a thing that not any one is finding interesting...It is a very simple one of them is completely different from any other one of them. Any one of them can easily completely be that thing can easily complete being completely different from any other one” (59). The plurality of difference is not worrying or peculiar but is rather common and accepted, which interests Stein because of this diversity and inclusivity. The emphasis on difference in “Italians” makes a stark contrast to a paragraph in the preceding poem, “Americans”: “By the white white white white, by the white white white white white white, by the white white white white by the white by the white white white white” (45). The sentence seems like it would be like a pledge to the American flag—by the red, white, and blue—but instead alludes to American whitewashing, such as the white appropriation of black musicians or the imitation of stereotypical black American voices by white Americans (*Amos ‘N’ Andy*). Yet, she ends the poem with “A neat not necklace neglect./ A neat not neglect. A neat. A neat not neglect” (45). The lines sound like “I need not neglect.” The



need is something that should be worn like a necklace in order to remind the speaker/reader. The reminder is to recognize the difference of American voices, to disrupt the “by the white,” “color him” and embrace that difference as American identity (44). These last few lines cause the reader to look back on the poem and recognize the puns on the English language based on other languages and American idioms that they may have neglected. As Stein writes in a later poem, “Any difference is great” (“Publishers” 140).

But what is striking about “Italians” and “Americans,” and the other poems based on nations is how abstract they appear. “Italians” could be substituted with any other national identity and the poem can still technically work. The titling of the poem does play a significant role in framing the reader’s mindset, but Stein is also purposefully employing abstraction in order for difference to enter the poems. Williams pinpoints a certain affect when reading Stein, noting “[t]he feeling is of word themselves” (545). I understand this feeling as how people use words: not with a dictionary always at hand but reacting with imagination and emotions. This feeling of words themselves, for Williams, is what makes Stein’s writing so radically democratic. He argues, “To be democratic, local (in the sense of being attached with integrity to actual experience) Stein, or any other artist, must for subtlety ascend to a plane of almost abstract design to keep alive” (547). Williams conflates democracy with localism and argues that to be democratic is to be local or to achieve the *feeling* (“actual experience”) of the local. Because the locale of the writer is different from varying readers, Williams suggests that the democracy in literature is obtainable when writing is abstract enough in order to give the feeling of words

themselves in relation to the reader and their locale. Thus, the abstraction in *Geography & Plays* is a technique of sincerity carefully employed by Stein in order to afford difference and plurality to enter the text and to avoid essentialisms and overgeneralizations.

Much in the way that Stein argues that knowledge about people and the world can be gained through listening, Lorine Niedecker, whose mentor was Zukofsky, also privileges sound as auto/biographical in a way that illuminates Stein's literary sincerity. In Niedecker's poem, "Synanism," she celebrates the pluralities of sound and how the sound of speech contributes to an individual's uniqueness. The poem plays with oral puns in a way that is reminiscent of the "wireless imagination" of *Tender Buttons*, creating different analogies through the sounds of words. Niedecker draws attention to these differences in the poem, writing, "All tongues backed by a difference" (36). "Difference" suggests an aural/oral difference that the organ "tongue" might inflect on a language, noting the embodied inflections on language. But "tongue" also suggests either a dialect or another language, acknowledging variations of a language and other languages. Further, the word synanism is a neologism that suggests dynamism but sounds like "synapse." The force and movement of the "wireless imagination" is synaptic, occurring within the individual as they process and engage the world. She writes, "Assumptions taxed are most related/ when untangled, the horn playing a thread, cows untended" (36). The introduction of sonic modernity re-wires or untangles the human brain to emphasize the relationality of the individual. Assumptions brought about by auralty are "most related" when the meanings are

untangled of their dictionary definitions and appeal to the emotions and imaginations of the individual, especially when heard (“the horn playing”).

In “Synamism,” Niedecker argues that there is no such thing as a totality of a language. Instead, she approaches language sincerely, acknowledging its difference and plurality. The aural/oral punning and the neologisms in “Synamism” indicate a push in Niedecker’s poetry to emphasize the localities that inflect language and create difference. In a letter to Zukofsky, Niedecker mentions that “radio should be a good medium for poetry” because it affords “speech without practical locale” (Feb 14, 1952); that is, radio affords plurality and resists restriction to one locality or a national standard. In the 1930s, Niedecker began her series of “folk poems” that would later be collected in the 1946 collection, *New Goose*. These folk poems, Jenny Penberthy points out, “focused her attention on the local and added to her folk poems the vernacular of her Black Hawk Island/Fort Atkinson community and particularly of her mother” (5-6). The poems of *New Goose* are conversational or overheard conversations, rooted in common language and concerned with the quotidian banalities of the people around her. These poems are not simply expressive of a locality but are also auto/biographical as *Geography & Plays* is by recording the conversations and everyday issues of that locality that she was living in.

For Niedecker, then, aurality/orality is a significant identifier; it is an expression of individual agency, identity, and the community/locality in which one belongs. This resonates not only with the practices of listening in Stein’s texts but also with the American radio system, in which localities were given agency. In “‘Speech without Practical Locale’: Radio and Lorine

Niedecker's Auralty," Brook Houglum argues that, for Niedecker, "aural perception was central to epistemology" (223). Houglum writes,

She describes objects and events in terms of their sounds and employs devices such as assonance, alliteration, and spatial organization to elicit and encourage aural reception. She quotes and writes distinctive speech patterns and phrases as a way to situate the meaning of particular material within its heard rhythms and tones, with *how* it was communicated. (223; original emphasis)

By eliciting and encouraging aural reception just as Stein does, Niedecker is taking part in the American wireless imagination that pinpoints auralty as a democratizing affect that causes readers to recognize the difference and plurality of the world, or at least of their country. As Houglum argues, "radio shifts 'fixed networks,' roles, and modes of perception that accompany conventional forms of listening and spoken performances" (225). In this way, Niedecker and Stein participate in sonic modernity's shift away from fixed networks, roles, and modes of perception, which experiments in writing *and* radio mutually contributed to.

This shift away from fixed networks also fundamentally blurred the line between private and public; as aforementioned in regards to sincerity and radio, sincerity blurred the line between private and public in order to create a sense of intimacy. In *Geography and Plays*, Stein expresses interest in the blurring of public and private that informs intimacy between author and reader. In the second poem of *Geography and Plays*, "Ada," Stein conveys this intimacy of sonic modernity by focusing on the interrelatedness of listening and talking. She writes, "She was

telling some one, who was loving every story that was charming. Some one who was living was almost always listening. Some one who was loving was almost always listening. That one who was loving was almost always listening. That one who was loving was telling about being one then listening” (16). She then adds, “Trembling was all living, living was all loving, some one was then the other one” (16). In this poem, “love” is that which requires telling and “almost always listening”—“almost” because the individual must also tell/talk. Love is aurally/orally defined; it requires listening and talking and the reciprocity that is required, addressing and being attentive to the other. “Trembling” suggests the affective intensity of being exposed to others, of living with others, and admitting the relationality of the self (“some one was then the other one”). An equal amount of talking and listening, in “Ada,” create an affective intensity that affords intimacy. Of course, this is not an inherent condition of the sonic modernity that radio introduces; love is required: the work of attention and reciprocal engagement.

“Ada” sets a precedent for the rest of the poems in *Geography and Plays*: the portraits, the geographies, and the plays all play on the blurring between the public and the private that affords intimacy and intimate engagement; the collection situates the shift away from a fixed network to a relational self, a self whose agency is an attentiveness to and engagement with others. Significantly, in these poems, plays, and portraits the self is never “erased” or “lost” in the blurring between private and public. Although Stein does express the fear of losing the self in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, the self in *Geography & Plays* is understood as unique and relational, that the self’s uniqueness is bound with the relationality of place and others. The

sincerity and vulnerability of intimacy that Stein conveys in *Geography & Plays* articulates an American sensibility of sincerity within sonic modernity, which seeks to democratize culture and language through the means of participation and reciprocity and recognizing the “space of time”—the relationality and embodied context, the here and now—of each individual.

### **Words in Freedom: Italian Futurism and the Sonic Relationality of *Tender Buttons***

This American sensibility of intimacy and dialogism within sonic modernity is evident in Stein’s earlier work, occurring before radio had taken a hold on the broader American popular imagination. In particular, Stein’s *Tender Buttons* participates in an early “wireless imagination” that significantly contributes to Stein’s subsequent approaches to and understanding of sonic modernity. Moreover, the publication of *Tender Buttons* provides a more complex and nuanced appreciation of “wireless imagination” that does not solely belong to the Futurists and F.T. Marinetti, who first defined it, and puts more of an emphasis on the relationality of orality/aurality. In the introduction to the Canadian publication of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, Steve McCaffery states that “it is common knowledge that Stein modeled *Tender Buttons* on the cubist techniques being developed by Piacasso, Braque and Gris...Cubism offered a ‘destructive’ method of composition, a system of multiplanar arrangements, of broken forms resulting in a two dimensional picture plane of both skewed and axonometric perspectives” (xi). But this tendency towards the “common knowledge” of *Tender Buttons* overlooks—or, rather, mishears—the sounds of *Tender Buttons*. Attributing to the book a “cubist technique” often lends to thinking of the book along visual terms—to imagine the poems as a painting. As a result,

playfulness with sound and the descriptions of sound in the text are often misheard in favour of *seeing* the composition. While the orality of Stein's poetics is, perhaps, common knowledge, the role of orality in *Tender Buttons* and its contribution to "sonic modernity" is less argued. Only recently, Chani Anine Marchiselli has argued that *Tender Buttons* "is noisy, chatty, and conversational" and "resonates with feminist communications theories that foreground listening, collaboration, experiential knowledge, and forms of collective agency" (70). Describing the book as "cubist" cannot take into account the noise and chatter of the poems in *Tender Buttons*. Indeed, on one hand, *Tender Buttons* can be described as a cubist description of objects, food, and rooms; but, on the other hand, it can be described as "sounding out" objects, food, and rooms to listeners who must actively imagine what is being described.

The publication of *Tender Buttons* challenges the conceptualization of the wireless imagination that had been established by F.T. Marinetti shortly before Stein's text. In fact, I suggest that *Tender Buttons* is in conversation with Marinetti and his conception of the wireless imagination. Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and her 1917 poem "Marry Nettie" make it clear that Stein had been aware of and met Marinetti on several occasions during the 1910s in her Paris salon; these texts additionally make clear that she was disinterested in their work and critiqued Futurists' politics. As she writes in *Autobiography*, "The futurists all of them led by Severini thronged around Picasso. He brought them all to the house. Marinetti came by himself later as I remember. In any case everybody found the futurists very dull" (*Autobiography* 153). Marinetti was the founding member of the Futurists, and in many of his manifestos and further

writing on what Futurism is, he extolled violence and “scorn for women” (“Manifesto of Futurism” 4). As he straightforwardly puts it, “We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman” (4)<sup>14</sup>. In Margerie Perloff’s blog post on Stein’s relationship to Marinetti, which supplements her chapter in *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* on this relationship, she asks: “Does Stein’s oblique and brilliant anti-manifesto thus present a credible challenge to Marinetti’s own? Yes and no. ....Marinetti’s first Futurist manifesto] offers “solutions” whereas Stein’s text dramatizes the need for quietude, daily routine, and individual fulfillment” (n.p.) But perhaps *Tender Buttons* offers a solution, or something close to a solution: a counter argument to the Futurists’ abrasiveness by emphasizing intimacy, curiosity, and relationality. For Marinetti, the wireless imagination is violent, one-directional, and disembodied. In *Tender Buttons*, Stein employs the aesthetics of the wireless imagination, but reconceives it as dialogical, embodied, and relational. Stein’s political move in her application of the wireless imagination is that she bends it towards an American radio imaginary of democratic participation and intimacy.

The Italian wireless significantly informed Marinetti’s conception of the “wireless imagination” and contributed to his development of futurism, shaping his relation to readers as one-to-many and his writing as “dictation.” Before radio was “radio” it was “the Marconi

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<sup>14</sup>. See also Marinetti’s “Contempt for Women.” This essay claims to support women suffragettes and that his contempt is towards societal norms and expectations of women (characterized by Marinetti as “Love”). But he still claims that women prevent men from “transcending his own humanity” and notes that women will still be “inferior” to men because of the way history played out (“Contempt for Women” 9).



wireless,” or simply “the wireless,” invented by Guglielmo Marconi (Campbell 4). What could be transmitted, though, was not sound but morse code. Marconi, applying the foundational research of Maxwell, Hertz, and other contributions to the wireless, conducted a series of historical experiments over three occasions that led to the invention of the radio<sup>15</sup>: 1) transmitting the morse code for “S” (three dots) across a flat field, 2) transmitting “S” through obstacles and non-flat land, and 3) the famous transatlantic “S” (Campbell 4-10). These experiments introduced radio- or wireless-telegraphy. The receiver of radio-telegraph messages was referred to as a *marconista*. Timothy Campbell describes the *marconista* as “the acoustic reception of weak signals, the solid connections between ear and hand required to transcribe the signal, and his subsequent inscription as a component of a wireless communication network” (29; original emphasis). Although the ability to transmit voices—afforded by the Alexanderson alternator (Hilmes 32)—became possible in the 1910s, the idea of the authoritative sender and the passive *marconista* was predominantly influential in the Italian radio imaginary.

For both Stein and Marinetti, the wireless imagination consists of new kinds of analogies, connections, and intimacies that the wireless produces, redefining the writers’ and readers’ relationship to language and to writing. However, whereas Marinetti views these intimacies of new analogies as violent and only occurring between poet and machine, which are later dictated to a public, Stein views these intimacies of new analogies as dialogic, occurring between humans

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<sup>15</sup> See Tapan Sarkar’s *History of Wireless*.

and language. In other words, Marinetti's interpretation of sonic modernity relies on how modern machines and their speed disrupted language itself; Stein's interpretation of sonic modernity expresses a greater awareness about how people *talk* about the same experiences. Take the title of *Tender Buttons* itself: it is an oxymoron, but it importantly challenges the reader to think of why buttons may be "tender" in their opinion—perhaps the "tender" refers to an emotional attachment, or maybe the buttons are weak and must be handled carefully. In her Columbia recordings of *The Making of Americans*, she notes that when she started writing the book (in 1903), "it was an effort to make clear just what I felt about the whole world *and how it talked*" ("The Speech Lab Recordings"; my emphasis). But rather than take dictation, she invites (and requires) collaboration from readers to make and continue to make the analogies, inviting a relationality to the text that Marinetti denies.

The wireless relationship between sender and receiver was a source of inspiration for the Italian Futurists. The wireless, for Marinetti, transformed writers into a *marconista*, passively registering the overwhelming sounds of modernity. Marinetti conceived this kind of writing as the "wireless imagination," which contains the qualities of "words-in-freedom" and the "destruction-of-syntax." The "wireless" for both Marconi and Marinetti meant a liberation of words, but this "liberation" was often characterized as a liberation of words *from the body*. Marconi, himself, is attributed with exclaiming, "Away with wires, away with heavy matter; all I need is the electric pulse for transmitting what is in the head and heart" (qtd in Campbell 7). This kind of rhetoric that lauds disembodiment as enabling communication will be echoed by

cyberenthusiasts I cite in chapter 5, notably John Perry Barlow, and in William Gibson's cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*. The wireless meant releasing the limitation that the body imposes on communication, the transmission of thoughts and feelings to a receiver. The receiver, the *marconista*, is also seen as being disembodied, as they cannot be seen but can only reply that they have received the transmission (Campbell 8). This disembodied rhetoric took hold in the imagination of Marinetti and the Futurists. In "The Founding and the Manifesto of Futurism," Marinetti describes himself and his colleagues being transfixed by the speed and noise of modern machines: "the furious sweep of madness drove us outside ourselves" (3). The "furious sweep" of sonic modernity is defined by a "shock," as Halliday provisionally describes one key response to sonic modernity (Halliday 30); it is violent and quick, immediately driving the human outside of the body.

The violent "shock" that Marinetti describes is necessary for the liberation of words; Marinetti believes that modern poetry in the age of sonic modernity is a "violent assault" on language that frees it from governing rules of grammar or even logic that is analogous with disembodiment (4). In his subsequent essays, he elaborates on this liberation of words or, as Marconi would put it, "the transmission of head and heart." Marinetti begins his "Technical Manifesto..." with a "raging need to liberate words" and finds this need met by taking dictation from a propeller of an airplane (15). The dictation of the propeller is a list of rules that demand the writer to "[a]bolish all punctuation," to dismiss adverbs and adjectives in favour of the directness of nouns and verbs, and to privilege analogies, pushing them as far as they can go

(16). To do so, however, he must “detach his head from a writing hand” (Campbell 76); Marinetti writes, “[t]hat hand that writes seems to separate from the body and freely leave far behind the brain, which, having itself in some way become detached from the body and airborne, looks down from on high with terrible lucidity upon unforeseen phrases emitted by the pen” (“Response to Objections” 20). For Marinetti, disembodiment affords the poet the ability to translate, through dictation, the “data” of sonic modernity and produce words-in-freedom (Campbell 76).

The central “unforeseen phrases” that Marinetti identifies are the new and unlikely analogies that the disembodied *marconista*’s words-in-freedom produce. In an attempt to clarify “wireless imagination,” Marinetti writes, “[b]y wireless imagination, I mean the absolute freedom of images or analogies, expressed with disconnected words, and without the connecting syntactical wires and without punctuation” (“Destruction of syntax” 30-31). With these new analogies, he argues, “we shall value them ever more intimately” (31). Just as the body’s limbs of the *marconista*/poet are detached, so are words detached from “syntactical wires”; they now exist up in the aether, waiting for the poet to tune in and dictate, to translate the morse code data of radio-telegraphy’s dots and dashes and create a new kind of intimacy to language but only to language itself.

Stein’s *Tender Buttons* exhibits the literary traits of the “wireless imagination” that Marinetti addresses—unconventional grammar and unlikely analogies—but bends this imagination towards dialogism rather than translation and dictation and views these intimacies of

the wireless imagination as occurring between humans and language. Whereas Marinetti emphasizes the “shock” of sonic modernity, Stein emphasizes, as Sam Halliday phrases it, the “depth” of sonic modernity which approaches the experiences of sound “as an index of where one stands on an historical [and, I’ll add and prioritize more, social] continuum” (Halliday 31). The words-in-freedom of Stein’s poems is their openness and relationality; the poems of *Tender Buttons*, in the way Wilson compares Stein’s poetry to radio, establish “a forum in which self, other, and community can be constituted through talk” (107). This approach to sound and language, in contrast to Marinetti, is plural and may be characterized as “noisy”; Marinetti’s dictation is a means of translating noise into meaning (Campbell 76). But the “noise” of Stein becomes meaningful when the reader responds to the text. In *Tender Buttons*’s opening poem, “A Carafe, That Is A Blind Glass,” Stein describes the carafe as “a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color” (19). The description prompts the reader to think of their carafe as both a decorative household object but also something so banal. The line “a single hurt color” asks the reader to imagine what a single hurt color could mean to them; the reader must complete the analogy. Stein ends this poem with the declaration that I feel is emblematic of the new analogies of American sonic modernity: “The difference is spreading” (19). The wireless imagination of Stein in *Tender Buttons* is not one of disconnection, dictation, and violent mastery over organizing language as it is for Marinetti; rather, it is an emergence of a difference and differences that spread between people, connecting them to each other in a network of differences.

In *Tender Buttons*, Stein also includes sounds and word play reliant on the sounding out of words and the familiarities these sounds conjure. Not only do these sonic qualities and aural demands demonstrate that Stein is actively listening but also that the reader must actively listen as well. The active listening of the reader enables them to construct individual meaning from the sounds of the poem just as “radio invited [audiences] to participate actively in the production of the show at hand...giving individual meaning to something that went out to a mass audience” (Douglas 4). In “A Substance in a Cushion,” Stein includes the creaking of a couch as it is being sat on: “a little groan grinding makes a trimming such a sweet singing trimming and a red thing not a round thing but a white thing, a red thing and a white thing” (21). The “groan” is presumably caused by someone sitting on the couch, but the groan can also be heard as an erotic encounter—groans and grinding of sexual activity. Stein attributes these sounds as transforming the couch, accentuating the trimming and changing the shape and colour of the couch. This passage in “A Substance in a Cushion” concerns the relationality of sound and draws attention to sound itself as being a “substance”—something that can alter an object for one or multiple people. This attention to sound as a substance significantly resonates with the nexus of sincerity, objectification, and dialogism of Zukofsky’s notion of sincerity. As Stein demonstrates further, she also includes how humans attribute meaning to objects by the sounds they are associated with. In “A Handkerchief,” Stein writes, “A winning of all the blessings, a sample not a sample because there is no worry” (35). The sound of sneezing “wins” or “receives” a verbal response of blessing—“bless you”—that is supposed to prevent any worry. Not only does Stein include the

relationality of sound, or what may be called sonic relationality, but also includes the customary oralities and oral reciprocities associated with objects.

So, although Stein may disconnect the wires of syntax and introduce new analogies, her approach to the wireless imagination is grounded by relationality and by meaning being produced through reciprocation; the wireless imagination of Stein includes the imagination of others. Marinetti, however, writes that “I am not greatly worried about being understood by the masses” (“Destruction of Syntax” 34). Marinetti’s lack of concern reflects the modern response to excessive auditory stimuli. As Jeffrey Schnapp points out, futurism made “a mockery of the models of systemic ordering and synthetic exposition that are essential to the functioning of modern markets and to modern knowledge production” (333-4). Futurist poets looked to posters, urban signage, and advertising that were “designed to visually and verbally *impose themselves* on distracted reader-viewers immersed in the informational din of the modern world” and crafted language “as shock, sound bite, headline, provocation” (334). Marinetti’s poem “Battle” exemplifies this attitude, in which the poem is clearly describing the sounds and images—the informational din—of a battle: “**Tatata** rifle-fire **pic pac pun pan pan** orange wool-fulvous machine-gun rattle leper-shelter sores forward” (“A Response to Objections” 22; original emphasis). The poem goes on and on, assaulting the reader with sounds and images for no other purpose than to “glorify war” (“The Founding...” 4). Marinetti believes that the “Only preoccupation of the narrator, to render all the vibrations of his “I” (“Destruction of Syntax...” 30). But Marinetti does not figure the vibration of his “I” as part of a “nexus of sensory

modalities that constitutes an encounter” (Goodman 48). Instead, Marinetti's vibrational “I” is only one-sided, encounter-less, but able to affect others; it dictates to and seeks to change and control a population. As he makes clear in “La Radia” with Pino Masnata, “Radio shall be...the elimination of the concept or the illusion of an audience” (n.p.). What Marinetti does not acknowledge (and what Stein does) is that “[a]ll entities are potential media that can feel or whose vibrations can be felt by other entities” (S. Goodman 83). For Marinetti, readers/viewers are distracted and immersed in the informational din of the modern world. The rhetorical figure of the *marconista* and Futurist rhetoric of the “wireless imagination” cast radio listeners as being able to be affected but not able to affect, making radio a means of controlling and managing affect. Indeed, perhaps Marinetti intends to shock his readers out of being so immersed in the informational din, but such an intention presupposes his readers as passive receptors instead of, as Stein does, active contributors and collaborators.

The disembodied rhetoric of Marconi, the figure of the *marconista*, and the misogynistic and violent rhetoric of the Futurists led by Marinetti, created and affirmed protocols for the radio that were eventually fascist.<sup>16</sup> And yet, the new analogies created by a “wireless imagination” are evident in Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. But Stein fundamentally departs from Marinetti when it comes to the body and sound because, for Stein, the body and sound are connective and relational and produce a mutual dialogue between speaker and listener. As Steve Goodman argues, “the body is

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<sup>16</sup>. See Timothy Campbell for more on this Italian history of radio and the fascist protocols of radio that were developed in Italy and adopted by Ezra Pound.



rendered as a multi-fix unit, as transducer of vibration as opposed to a detached listening subject isolated from its sonic object” (46). Consider Stein’s “Sauce”: “What is bay labored what is all be section, what is no much. Sauce sam in” (68). This passage, in particular, resonates with Marchiselli’s argument that *Tender Buttons* “encourages the listeners to hear and speak the sounds of Stein’s domestic experiences” (70). But also, I may add, the domestic experiences of the readers. “bay labored” sounds like “belaboured,” noting the detail and embodied work that goes into making sauce. But bay also brings to my mind a body of water or, more appropriately, “liquid” like sauce, as well as “bay leaves,” which are often involved in sauce recipes. Sauce is a “section” because it is only part of a meal and “no much” without, say, pasta. And “sam in” not only sounds like “salmon” but refers to (or vibrates into) the next poem, “Salmon,” the poem drawing attention to its sonic relationality to other poems in the collection.

Stein is thoroughly connective and affective: the relationality of sounds, the relationality of the text, and the conjuring up of images *through* the reader’s sounding out of words, creating, as Steve Goodman would put it, a vibrational nexus that puts bodies, objects, and sound in community. Stein’s work was even described by her peers as “vibrational,” albeit in a far less egotistic manner. Mina Loy writes, “In Gertrude Stein life is never detached from Life; it spreads tenuous and vibrational between each of its human exteriorization and the other” (“Gertrude Stein” 433). It is significant to mention that Loy once was affiliated with the Futurists before she met Stein in the 1910s (See Rainey 417), so it is not a coincidence that she uses language similar to the Futurists but emphasizes, instead, the connective work of Stein’s vibrations. Thus, *Tender*

*Buttons*, just as much as it is a “cubist” work is also an oral, vibrational work in which its “wireless imagination” counters the Futurists’ conceptions of authority and detachment and advocates for dialogism and connection between reader, text, and author.

### **The Making of a Nation: The BBC Imperative and *The Making of American’s* Celebration of its Own Grand Narrative Failure**

In the 1920s, the British radio imaginary seemed to be caught in between the two kinds of “wireless imagination” that have been presented in this chapter—between authoritative dictation (Marinetti) and participative dialogism (Stein). Although the British held in high regard the controlled dissemination of culture/nationalism that radio afforded, problems of authority, censorship, and paternalism emerged. The British did not enter the radio industry until 1922, much later than Italy and America, but they did so in order to avoid stumbling into the “chaos” that they perceived was occurring in America, taking precautions to ensure a controlled entry into radio programming and radio licensing. The British’s precaution, led by the Post Office and radio manufacturers, established the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) as the sole authority by 1923 (Hilmes 43). The BBC’s authority was to prevent any commercialization and unwanted programming, especially programming from outside of Britain. The BBC’s goal to make British radio exclusively British was ensured by controlling the manufacturing, taxing, and selling of radio sets themselves. As Hilmes points out, the radio sets sold to the British public were “low-cost sets” that guaranteed affordability but also that the “reception of stations from outside Britain would not be possible, for the time being at least” (49). The modified received sets that

were taxed and the inauguration of one main, government-controlled broadcaster was a national mandate of “cultural uplift.” As Sir John Reith writes in his book *Broadcasting Over Britain* on this national imperative,

our [BBC’s] responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement, and to avoid the things which are, or may be, hurtful...to give the public what we think they need—and not what they want, but few know what they want, and very few what they need. (34)

This imperative was a paternalistic endeavour to make radio a national and cultural tool that would keep the British population’s ears “unpolluted” and within its own national borders.

Reith’s paternalism in the imagination and rhetoric of the BBC resonates with the fascist rhetoric of Marconi and Marinetti and stands in stark contrast to the pluralism of Stein’s democratic poetics and wireless imagination that Stein addresses in her book *The Making of Americans*. The BBC, before 1925 and afterwards under the direction of Reith, was attempting its “Making of the British,” hoping to democratically disseminate curated British culture to the British people. The BBC’s programming was, as Avery points out, a joining of “evangelicalism, utilitarianism, ethical idealism, and Arnoldian cultural theory” (13) that sought to “educate and elevate” (Crissel 56) the British people. The publication of *The Making of Americans*, however, emphasizes the relationality of life (“mixing,” Stein calls it). The book puts forth the argument that cultural education is gained from listening to others, and acknowledges the impossibility of a

unified cultural identity while praising the pluralism that this impossibility invites. *The Making of Americans*, in its size and scope, contains a grand narrative gesture and may strike one as being similar to the grand paternalist narrative the BBC, under the direction of Sir John Reith, had set out to achieve. But Stein's book significantly acknowledges and celebrates the failure of that grand national narrative, emphasizing the continual *making* of Americans that relationality and reciprocity affords. Although *The Making of Americans* was written between 1906-1913, it was edited until its publication in 1925. *The Making of American's* 1925 publication date is timely and significant in relation to the founding and dominance of the BBC in Britain by then because of the book's grand national narrative it participates in and critiques.

Despite their holistic aims, the BBC were in fact at odds within their programming. While the majority of the BBC's programming reflected their mandate that radio is a "means of producing...cultural norms expressive of an orthodox Christian morality" and staffed such influential writers as T.S. Eliot, who championed these ideals and brought them into his radio broadcasts, the Bloomsbury group resisted the BBC's mandate and ideals (Avery 15). On air, the Bloomsbury group, notably Virginia and Leonard Woolf, E.M. Forster, and Desmond McCarthy, believed in encouraging readers' own interpretations and reading practices. Contrary to the Reithian mandate of elevation and instruction, the Bloomsbury group believed in "the supreme ethical value of conversation and friendship" (Avery 44). Although the Bloomsbury group do take on an instructive position in order to rhetorically counter the BBC's rhetoric, they incorporate a deconstruction of their own authority in their radio broadcasting and share similar

hopes and promises that the “wireless imagination” of Stein’s *The Making of Americans* sets out to achieve.

John Reith oversaw much of the programming, rules, and regulations of the BBC. Reith’s conservative spiritual and moral beliefs highly influenced the BBC’s approach to culture and nationalism and defined British modernist writers in relation to these beliefs. Reith was appointed as the General Manager of the BBC in 1922, quickly becoming the Managing Director in 1923 and then the Director-General in 1927 until his departure from the BBC in 1938. His *Broadcast Over Britain* set the bar for BBC radio protocols and provides his definition of democracy, which stresses what Todd Avery calls “the sonic dissemination of imperial standards” (18). Avery’s description of Reith “democracy” points to similarities between Reith’s definition of “democracy and Marinetti’s vibrational “I.” In Reith’s conception of democracy, radio broadcasting is a means of unifying the nation, providing moral and spiritual instruction to all: “Broadcasting brings the whole country into contact with the great achievements of men and women in all departments of physical as well as mental activity” (151-152). He goes to great lengths to argue that radio is not a mere trifling thing, that broadcasting “touches life at every angle. It must, and does, appeal to every kind of home” (78). Because Reith saw radio as being all pervasive, he argues that the ones in control of broadcasting bear a “responsibility” to the people for the “preservation of a high moral standard” (32). In the opening chapter of his book, Reith defines broadcasting as that which “enjoys the co-operation of the leaders of that section of the community whose duty and pleasure is to give relaxation to the rest, but it is also the

discoverers of the intellectual forces which are moulding humanity, who are striving to show how time may be occupied not only agreeably, but well” (1). For Reith, broadcasting should only be in the hands of leaders, whose goal is to mould or shape listeners to live an agreeable life according to the cultural standards set by those leaders. Further, listeners described as “relaxed” connote a passive kind of listening, wherein the listeners have no agency over the material.

Broadcasting, in the radio imaginary of John Reith’s BBC, is a “means and not the end” of uniting and establishing a nation while also making the people in the image of that nation (89). Reith’s conception of the democracy of radio—that radio “brings the whole country into contact”—resonates with Ben Anderson’s articulation of radio and affect. Anderson argues that radio “promises to synchronize a heterogeneous population through the attunement of bodies at a distance” (179-180). Reith’s conception of radio’s democratic potential is that it synchronizes a *heterogeneous* population through sonic dissemination in which bodies are affectively attuned to the cultural and national standards established by co-operating leaders. Thus, Reith’s democratic dissemination of imperial standards is rather an affective attunement that *homogenizes* the population; the vibrations of a nationalist “I” affect and synchronize a population but is unaffected by that population.

In *The Making of Americans*, Stein sets out to perform a similar “grand narrative” gesture, hoping to represent the entire American population. But rather than a one-to-many approach to addressing the whole population, the book is accretive, incrementally moving forward by the relationality of American lives. At the outset of the novel Stein indicates that she

intends it to be “the history for us of a family and its progress” (4). The beginning of the novel follows the Dehnings and then the Herslands, but Stein attempts and hopes that “soon” in the novel there will be a history of every American. She writes,

Soon then there will be a history of every kind of men and women of all the mixtures in them, sometime there will be a history of every man and every woman who ever were or are or will be living and of the kind of nature in them and the way it comes out from them from their beginning to their ending, sometime then there will be a history of each one of them and of the many millions always being made just like them, there will be sometime a history of all of them, there will be a history of them and now there is here a beginning. (176)

Stein suggests that in the historical narrative of a family’s progress is a means of accessing every American family’s history. As she hints in the beginning of the novel, “We need only realise our parents, remember our grandparents and know ourselves and our history is complete” (3). Stein asks for the reader to “realise,” “remember,” and “know” themselves and others as they are reading text because it will give them a sense of themselves “being an American.”

While relationality in *Tender Buttons* was more focused on the relationality between the reader and objects, food, and rooms, relationality in *The Making of Americans* is a means of understanding Americans and American life. Predominantly more than *Tender Buttons*, it is *listening* to others, a kind of aural-relationality, that reaches towards a grand narrative. Stein writes, as if *speaking* to the reader: “And so listen while I tell you all about us, and wait while I

hasten slowly forwards, and love, please, this history of this decent family's progress" (34).

Listening, like Reith's conception of radio listening practices, puts the whole country in contact; that is, it draws an individual outside of their own self to consider others in relation to being a "real American." Listening does so by establishing an intimacy and attentiveness ("love") that is firmly located and maintained in the present ("hasten slowly forwards"), coaxing individuals to "know" themselves in relation to an imagined group of others that form a "nation." Thus, "love" for Stein is an affective awareness of the intimate relationality of being: "More and more I love it of them, the being in them, the mixing in them, the repeating in them, the deciding the kind of them every one is who has human being" (289). Love, then, acknowledges others ("the being in them"), the relationality of being ("the mixing in them"), the attention to others ("the repeating in them"), and the differences between people ("the deciding the kind of them"). Love in the act of listening, for Stein, is *not* the authoritative instruction/telling of Reithian broadcasting but is rather a decentering and non-authoritative act, an abandonment towards others.

Stein constantly reminds the reader that they are "listening" to the text, to others in the text, and that Stein is "telling" the history. Throughout the text, Stein repeats, "as I was saying." The Martha Hersland section, for instance, contains the phrase five times within a short paragraph (414). The frequency of "as I was saying" reminds the reader that they are reading an oral history, an unfolding narrative of a wireless imagination. But "as I was saying" also draws the reader back into the presentness of the text, that they are listening in to a broadcast. Stein writes that "I am writing for myself and strangers...I want readers so strangers must do it" (289),



which she later compares to radio broadcasting in “I Came and Here I Am” because of the novel’s aurality and demand to listen and stay present.

The repetition of “as I was saying” and the large amount of repetition throughout the whole novel can be tedious, but Stein’s efforts to keep the reader present is to have them pay particular attention to the difference in the repetition. She writes,

Many things then come out in the repeating that make a history of each one *for any one who always listens to them*. Many things come out of each one and *as one listens to them listens to all the repeating in them*, always this comes to be clear about them, the history of them of the bottom nature in them, the nature or natures mixed up in them to make the whole of them in anyway it mixes up in them. (183; my emphasis)

Active listening, for Stein, is to pay most particular attention to the repetition of others. As Scott Pound points out, “[f]or Stein, repeating is the basis for an aurally-constituted ontology and epistemology” and the “ostensible banality of everyday prattle is...a deep reservoir of music and meaning” (27; 29). Like the repetition in *Geography & Plays* and the “reduced listening” that it evokes, *The Making of Americans* pushes readers towards reduced listening by including large amounts of repetition while also repeatedly reminding the reader to pay attention, that they are listening to and participating in a “literature...as a [broadcast] event” (Pound 34). This repetition in the text accumulates an embodied and material “palpable sediment”—or rather, “sentiment”—

in which the reader can explore, observe, and integrate into their own understanding of being American.

Stein's broadcast, however, requires a return; the reciprocity of the listener is what accumulates into what the American nation is. Although Reith does acknowledge British listener feedback, his emphasis is always on the co-operation of leaders and the responsibility of the broadcaster to educate the British. In contrast, *The Making of Americans* importantly contains a sudden realization of "failure." And Stein's failure is a marvelous failure that counters capitalist and patriarchal privileges of success and (re)production, as Jack Halberstam argues. Halberstam writes, failure offers "more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2). Stein realizes that *The Making of Americans* is far from being a history of everybody. Stein's realization shapes her understanding of "everybody," departing from a modernist grand narrative towards an almost postmodern understanding of everybody as every body in relation to oneself, and that "everybody" is a composite of the pluralities relationality invites. She admits within the last few hundred pages of the book, "I am not certain that I cannot very soon have finished writing a complete history of all men and all women...Certainly I will be going on being one telling about being in men and women. I am going on being such a one" (684). What soon was supposed to be a complete history early on in the book is now only an unfinished one. Stein's admission of failure relinquishes "mastery" in favour for "conversation" (Halberstam 12), and puts forwards a realization, acceptance, and celebration of the continual making and unmaking of Americans. Stein's failure should not be viewed negatively, as Halberstam urges us

to rethink failure and especially queer failure in relation to Stein, because she refuses to give up paying attention to others. By doing so, Stein encourages her readers to follow her step and, as fellow Modernist Samuel Beckett puts it, “Fail again. Fail better” (qtd in Halberstam 24).

Rather than the country’s population imagining a complete nation, Stein’s incompleteness affords inclusivity and diversity, while also inviting contradiction and ambivalence in her definition of being an American. Stein argues that broadcasting is making and unmaking a nation, negotiating and acknowledging difference. And again, this negotiation and acknowledgement is in listening to talk and talking: “This will be now much history of talking and listening. I talk one way and listen one way and talk other ways and listen other ways and so probably does every one” (728). The shift in the book that will “now” be a history of talking and listening puts the highest importance on aurality/orality and the difference that aurality/orality invites. As Cavarero emphasizes about voice and the interdependence between talking and listening: it is “a reciprocal invocation in which the voices convoke one another in turn...there is a process of self-distinction in the repetitive rhythm of the duet, in the reciprocal giving of uniqueness and relation” (170, 171). Stein’s conception of sonic modernity is not a grand, overarching sense of being in a nation but rather the reciprocal giving of plurality and difference that is making a nation: “These are so very many ways of thinking and feeling connecting, not connecting, of being existing, of not being existing” (772). Whereas Reith’s notion of democracy that sonic modernity afforded is focused on *access to* culture, Stein’s notion is focused on uniqueness and relationality, which *contributes to* culture. She writes, “Every one

then is an individual being. Every one then is like many others always living” (290).

Contradictorily, every one is an individual and is thus like everybody else. But that similarity is not sameness; the repetition between people is making them unique because “[t]he repeating is a little changing” (191). The difference of repeating is a difference Stein (and others) can hear because of “reduced listening.”

Stein, then, is very concerned with the way in which sonic modernity brings about a greater awareness of individual’s agency, uniqueness, and relationality. What starts off as a grand narrative in *The Making of Americans*, then becomes an awareness of all the difference and pluralities within communities and nations that one can *hear*. In Britain, the Bloomsbury Group similarly envision sonic modernity as affording a plethora of different and varying perspectives rather than maintaining total control over others. As Avery points out, “Bloomsbury’s ethics stand in sharp contrast to the idealist ethics of the BBC’s founders and early administration” (37). In their opposition to the BBC’s standards, the Bloomsbury writers share with Stein the emphasis on dialogue between readers and giving readers agency. The “Bloomsbury Bible,” as Bloomsbury scholars refer to the influential *Principia Ethica* by G.E. Moore, provided the Bloomsbury group with an ethics and aesthetics that is largely founded in conversation (of which they thought Reith stifled). And radio, as Kate Whitehead argues, “was the ideal medium” for achieving a democratic ethics founded on conversation (Whitehead 121).

The plurality and difference of the Bloomsbury group’s emphasis on conversation reconceived their idea of the written language as appealing to common readers, establishing the

dialogical appeal of sincerity. This dialogical appeal<sup>17</sup> stresses an attentiveness to others, not only in the manner of respecting their ideas and opinions but also in the way they use language. Furthermore, the dialogical appeal dissolves the common opposition between speech and writing, emphasizing the “vocal rhythms” and reciprocity that “decide the movement of the text” (Cavarero 141). In Woolf’s last 1937 broadcast “Craftsmanship,” she stresses the ordinary use of language and asks her listeners to listen to how others and they themselves use language in order to resist fixity. Beginning with dictionary definitions, Woolf then deconstructs her and the dictionary’s authority and argues, “[b]ut words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind. If you want proof of this, consider how often in moments of emotion when we most need words we find none” (204). She draws attention to the (wireless) freedom of language within moments of affective intensities, celebrating the idiomatic uses of language by each individual. This gesture of deconstructing one’s authority in order to encourage and validate the other’s response and opinion is a Bloomsbury rhetorical technique, especially when it comes to reading and radio. Peter Fifeld argues that E.M. Forster’s 135 broadcasts contain “an imaginative construction of a listenership combined with a deconstruction of authoritative statement” (62). And in Desmond McCarthy’s “The Art of Reading” radio series, Avery points out that McCarthy believes that “readers’ enjoyment of literary works...cultivates a heightened sensitivity to other individuals as well as a recognition of one’s own implicatedness in others’ (texts’ and individuals’) perpetual

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<sup>17</sup>. The “dialogical appeal” is not often associated with radio, as this chapter demonstrates (Marinetti, Eliot, Reith). Rather, radio, when sometimes thought of in relation to modernist literature, is seen as solipsistic and representative of a modernist sense of isolation (see Lewty).

emerging into being” (72). The Bloomsbury group’s broadcasts demonstrate an awareness of being on Reith’s BBC and the cultural paternalism that presumes it and unwork or deconstruct this paternalism by stressing the relationality of their broadcasts and of literature. This self-aware and -enforced relationality establishes a dialogical appeal, a *feeling* of conversation.

Whether they were discussing literature, language, or news events, the strategies and instruction of the Bloomsbury group were to encourage personal use of language and have an intimacy with language. Doing so, as Avery points out about McCarthy’s “Art of Reading” radio series, prompts the individual to reflect on their relationality and the relationality of language. For Woolf, words “are highly democratic, too... that one word is as good as another; uneducated words are as good as educated words, uncultivated words as cultivated words, there are no ranks or titles in their society” (206). Reith believed that radio unified a nation by democratically delivering culture to all citizens; Woolf, in an important distinction, argues that the radio unifies a nation through its awareness of the democratic plurality of words. Koppen points out that the significance of the broadcast’s “topic was not the performative, illocutionary force of words...but an incitement for the ‘ordinary man’ to use language with greater confidence and freedom” (144). For the Bloomsbury group, the public should feel confident in their use of language and writers and broadcasters must encourage that freedom and confidence in language use. This effort establishes a dialogical relationship that affords the *feeling* of conversation.

Bloomsbury's arguments and attempts at being a part of the masses (rather than *apart from*), informed by the changing soundscape, reflect the aims and aesthetics of Stein’s *The*

*Making of Americans*. As I pointed out above about *The Making of Americans*, the use of “As I was saying,” which usually precedes digressions, make the novel *feel* conversational. But it is also the use of simple, repeated language and her refusal to make intertextual references that achieve a dialogical appeal because, as Woolf may put it, the language is not bent towards instruction or elevation but is geared towards ordinary, common usage. In “The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans,” Stein writes, “I seem always to be doing the talking when I am anywhere but in spite of that I do listen. I always listen. I always have listened. I always have listened to the way everybody has to tell what they have to say” (135). By constantly listening, she realizes that “everybody was always telling everything that was inside them that made them that one” (136). Listening to “everybody” invites differences just as the Bloomsbury group’s attention to their listeners and readers invited difference by denying cultural authority.

Although the Bloomsbury group’s and Stein’s writing may be aesthetically different, their aims at achieving a dialogical appeal resonate with one another and are largely informed by a shared radio imaginary that encourages conversation and individual agency. It is also significant to point out that by the 1920s, just as the Bloomsbury group were attempting to hold conversations with their readers/listeners and to deconstruct their authority, Stein started writing about her work in such a way to appeal to readers, what she called “audience writing”: “An Elucidation” was written in 1923, followed by “Composition as Explanation” and then her American lectures in 1934. This shift towards thinking about how (her) writing is received during the radio boom is no coincidence. My juxtaposition of Reith’s and Bloomsbury’s radio

imaginary illuminates aspects of Stein's growing sense of aurality/orality in the modernist soundscape and how she wrestled with both the Reithian conception of sonic modernity and Woolf's Bloomsbury aesthetic of conversation. On the one hand, *The Making of Americans* suggests a greater sense of the nation, that one can listen and hear the whole nation. On the other hand, the more one listens to a nation, the more difference is recognized.

### **Conclusion: Embodied, Wireless Sincerity**

Even though American radio never was as democratic as some imagined, many writers and thinkers thought of its potential as vitally important to the American sense of democracy because radio effectively blurred the lines between the public and private, creating a sense of individuality that was fundamentally relational. In fact, the degrees of emphasis on or the avoidance of the relationality that radio can foster is a political strategy, a politics of hearing. And this politics of hearing in radio mutually emerges with the writing of Modernists. Thus, the writing of Marinetti reflects the radio imaginary in Italian fascist politics; the writing of the Bloomsbury group counters the radio imaginary of the BBC and its pseudo-fascist politics of cultural paternalism; and the writing of Stein, Niedecker, Zukofsky, and Williams reflects the localism of American radio while also countering the standardization of the American airwaves. Hilmes notes that radio did contribute to a unification of the nation, "constructing a national norm of 'whiteness'" (*Radio Voices* xix). But this unification and its homogenization did not go uncontested. As Hilmes argues, "[t]o call radio broadcasting as constructed by major national institutions 'the nation's voice' is to refer not to one uncontested discourse, but to the one that



dominates out of the many competing, often conflicting, voices that make up the whole of broadcast experience” (*Radio Voices* xvii). The participation of Stein and other American writers in the American radio imaginary seeks to “look for those elements that are silenced and muffled within the voice that speaks the loudest” (xvii).

Situating Stein within the Modernist radio imaginary demonstrates the varied approaches that other writers, informed by different ideologies, brought to sonic modernity and how they streamed into each other. Although “wireless imagination” is often associated with Italian fascism and the Futurists, the wireless imagination of Marinetti is not exemplary of *the* wireless imagination. Stein’s *Tender Buttons* features the freedom of association that Marinetti employed in his wireless imagination. But rather than focusing on an authoritative stance, *Tender Buttons* demands the reader’s collaboration; it is directed to an other, requiring the other’s reception and translation in a way that is reminiscent of earlier radio telegraphy and communication between ham operators in the 1910s. *The Making of Americans* first appears as a Modernist gesture of establishing a grand narrative much in the way that Reith’s BBC was a grand narrative of British imperialism under the guise of “democratic dissemination.” But *The Making of Americans* recognizes the failure and problems of homogenization that the grand narrative presents, and instead argues for, as the Bloomsbury Group does in response to Reith’s BBC, an aural attention to the everyday people of America. The failure of *The Making of Americans* promotes the relational identities of America and reveals the problems of a unified national culture that stifles pluralism and diversity. Thus, not only does modernist writing mutually emerge with the

developments of radio and varying imaginations, but they also feed into each other and respond to one another.

In *Geography & Plays*, Stein expresses a need for constant (re)negotiation of the transcendent sociality of sonic modernity in order to afford a plurality and relationality of unique, embodied voices, democratizing language and culture. And the central means of achieving this constant (re)negotiation is through sincerity, which involves dialogism, decentering authority, recognition of the other, and encouraging readers' agency. In American Modernist literature, sincerity is means of countering the standardization of and suppression of marginalized groups on the radio, which paved the way for American broadcasting in television. As Hilmes argues,

close analysis of radio begins to unravel the mask that U.S. commercial media have created for themselves: as a naturally arising, consensus-shaped, and unproblematic reflection of a pluralistic society, rather than the conflicting, tension-ridden site of the ruthless exercise of cultural hegemony, often demonstrating in its very effort to exert control the [sic] power and diversity of the alternative popular constructions that oppose and resist it. (*Radio Voices* xvii)

Stein demonstrates an awareness of the mask that was slowly being unravelled, and her *Geography and Plays* and later work placed greater emphasis on the aural/oral plurality and diversity of localism as a means of resisting the standardization of the “national voice.” By no means entirely

successful, the American radio imaginary aimed to draw attention to and keep the plurality and diversity heard within the “chaos” of sonic modernity.

The next chapter focuses on Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*, published in 1937, and a radio installation of Stein’s text I did with Stephen Trothen called “Everybody’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*.” The chapter positions *Everybody’s Autobiography* as a radiotext, a text modelled after radio, which seeks to challenge the standardization of the Modernist soundscape and unravel the mask of commercial media. In chapter 4, I shift from the beginnings of radio to the beginnings of the internet. The arrival of the internet was met with a new sense of democratic potential and hope in ways similar to radio because it did not develop out of a history of broadcasting. Both early radio and early internet share the enthusiasm and excitement of democratic potential and hope, as well as the problems and contradictions and ignorance that this potential and hope elicit. Both demonstrate a rhetoric that upholds a dialogical appeal, and “sincerity” as a means to resist standardization and the one-to-many relationship returns to American fiction. But whereas radio privileged aural/orality, the internet posits the written word as a means of achieving democracy, although some argue that the Internet contains a blend of writing *and* speech. And just like American modernist writers were partaking in the American radio imaginary of sonic modernity, so are contemporary American writers partaking in the imaginary of the internet, one that signals a shift into what I am calling Late Postmodernism.

### Chapter 3: Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*

#### Introduction: Here Comes Everybody<sup>18</sup>

Although Sarah Wilson posits *Brewsie and Willie* as the exemplary text that demonstrates the formal model of radio, this chapter argues that the formal model of radio and Stein's belief in its democratic potential can be traced back earlier in her book *Everybody's Autobiography*. I demonstrate my argument through a critical media project approach to the book by the means of a radio installation that foregrounds the orality of the book. I argue that *Everybody's Autobiography* deals more explicitly and directly than any of Stein's other texts with the inextricable links between the affective and democratic potential of radio and the threat to that potential. In the previous chapter, I defined and expanded upon the Modernist soundscape, positioning Stein among her contemporaries as contributing to sonic modernity, the cultural, technological, and literary soundscape of Modernism. Moreover, in tracing the mutual emergence of the aurality/orality in Stein's work with that of radio, I argued that central to Stein's radio imaginary is an objectivist notion of sincerity, which emphasizes dialogism and reciprocity, intimacy, and embodied/material contextuality. Within the increased sociality of the modernist soundscape, Stein discerned the potential for democratic and communal connection (sociability), the potential for a network to "compear." Yet, the previous chapter focused on Stein's texts published in the 1910s and 1920s, in which Stein's conception of writing was based on a one-to-one relationship between writer and reader. Even *The Making of Americans*'s plurality is quite segmented, organized and paced in its movement from one individual to the next.

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<sup>18</sup> This subtitle alludes to the reoccurring character, HCE, in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a book that contains some experimentation and allusions to radio and wireless telegraphy. But the subtitle also refers to Clay Shirky's overly-optimistic book on the democratizing tools of the internet, *Here Comes Everybody*. The double-entendre reference delightfully speaks to the kinds of juxtapositions being made in this dissertation.

In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein shifts her conception of identity towards a more radical conception of relationality beyond one-to-one and imagines community as something that shapes and is shaped by a continual engagement of individuals. In this chapter, I argue that Stein replicates the communal affect and the democratic potential of radio in *Everybody's Autobiography* in the way she renders the reading and listening of the text to be autobiographical, participatory, and dialogic through the sincerity of her writing. By “democratic”, I mean the democratic participation in the meaning-making of the text and the ways Stein privileges both the uniqueness and relationality of readers’ voices. As Adriana Cavarero argues about the democratic value of the voice, “The free and equal individuals, who have nothing in common with one another, finally find their community in the communicative relationality of a language that binds them because it binds them to its procedural norms. Language becomes the bond of the unbound. It becomes a universal bond that makes the linguistic community the most suited for constituting a democracy of individuals” (Cavarero 188). For Stein, it is the uniqueness of the individual’s voice and the relationality of the voice that constitute a democratic notion of language and culture, and it is radio that foregrounds this notion. The radio installation that I completed with Stephen Trothen illustrate the plurality and uniqueness that *Everybody's Autobiography* produces, while also demonstrating the way the text “bonds” the “unbound” and constitutes a democracy of individuals through the sharing of an oral “automediation.” Thus, the radio, in this chapter, is a critical tool—both theoretically and methodologically—that aids in my articulation of the democratic poetics and radio imaginary that is in *Everybody's Autobiography*.

Stein first encountered radio during her 1934 tour of America, following the success of *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*. Reflecting on her encounter with radio, Stein writes,

It was it was really all going on, and it was, it really was, as if you were saying what you were saying and *you knew you really knew, not by what you knew but by what you felt, that everybody was listening*. It is a very wonderful thing to do, I almost stopped and said it, I was so filled with it. And then it was over and I never had liked anything as I had liked it. (“I Came and Here I Am” 72; my emphasis)

*Knowing* that there is a public listening is not the basis of Stein’s knowledge of this fact; this knowledge—the realness—of people listening is *felt* by her. Moreover, what fills her so much to the point of stopping is everybody’s—not an individual’s—listening. Stein is shocked—affected—by this intensity of listening because she has never experienced that kind of connectivity, despite playing with this kind of connectivity in prior years. Writing on Stein’s response to radio, Wilson significantly mentions *Everybody’s Autobiography* in a way that has caused me to explore it as a text that demonstrates imaginative and ethical encounters with radio. Wilson writes,

Just as Stein hoped to do in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, the radio creates ‘everybody’ by creating the audience, a kind of community that understands itself as existing in (varying) relation to a mass medium. This audience is not passive, and the broadcast is not unidirectional; as Stein’s voice fills the airwaves, she in turn is filled by listening. (108)

Stein finds radio to be dialogic, participatory, active, and, what Wilson glosses over, affective in its capability to create the feeling of community, in which individuals understand themselves *through feeling* as existing in varying relation to an intimate network of people.

Radio, as Stein sees it, aurally creates a site of community wherein identity is produced in relation to others; listening becomes auto/biographical because of the reciprocity that listening

demands. As Brandon LaBelle argues, “to produce and receive sound is to be involved in connections that make privacy intensely public, and public experience distinctly personal” (468). Further, he adds, “sound necessarily generates listeners and multiplicity of acoustical ‘viewpoints’ adding to the acoustical event the operations of sociality” (469). Stein casts radio as creating affective publics that drive emergent democratic feelings rather than entrapping those feelings. Affective publics, as Zizi Papacharissi defines them, are “networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment,” wherein affective intensities become meaningful when they elicit “feelings of community and identity” (125; 129). Affect is not inherently democratic but it is, as Papacharissi argues, “inherently political” (16). And so, Stein, in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, is exploring and imagining the affective potential of democracy that radio and its orality/aurality elicit. She values the “acoustical viewpoints” that radio produces, and she believes that the blurring of public and private that the sound of radio introduced gives way to an oral autobiographical expression amongst everyday individuals.

But what I struggled with was how to foreground the aurality of *Everybody’s Autobiography* in relation to radio and the book’s imagination of radio’s affective publics that elicit feelings of community and identity. Drawing from the text alone would not suffice, as it would reinforce the visuality of the text: how it *reads* rather than how it is *heard*. Karin Cope, Michel Delville, Angela Steidele, and Scott Pound have all stressed the embodiment of orality in reading Stein, but their argument is still made in writing. The exception is Scott Pound, who refers to Stein’s reading of *The Making of Americans* in 1934. But Stein’s recording does not completely support his point that “the meaning of the passage depends on how we hear it” because we only are listening to how Stein reads it, how she hears her text (29). So, I decided to

provide a creative critical approach to *Everybody's Autobiography* and its relationship to radio in order to pluralize how others hear the text. With Stephen Trothen, I retrofitted a 1931 Philco radio as an installation that played audio recordings of collaborators who each read a selected chapter in its entirety. Using Arduino microcontrollers and the program Max/MSP, the collaborators' audio recordings were organized into what I call "book stations." I prefer to call the contributors who read for the project "collaborators" in order to emphasize the collaboration not only between them and myself but also between them and Stein. As Stein writes in *Everybody's Autobiography*, "I like the word collaboration and I have a kind of imagination of how it could take place" (278). The radio installation is one way to imagine how collaboration can take place with Stein. Those who only attend the installation and listen to it are referred to as "participants" because they are participating in the "radio event." Participants at the installation can tune from one book station to the next by turning the dial on the radio. Each book station is comprised of six audio recordings by six separate collaborators, each reading a separate chapter in order to have, essentially, an audio book of *Everybody's Autobiography*. Although the number of readers amongst chapters are uneven, we were able to create eight book stations with the average median of chapters read by individuals being five. A video demonstrating the radio installation that we called "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*," thanks to the suggestion by Eric Schmaltz, can be found at this link:

<https://englishatwaterloo.wordpress.com/2016/06/20/rewiring-gertrude-stein/>.<sup>19</sup>

The installation foregrounds the materiality of a 1930s radio to emphasize the intimacy and the centrality of the medium within a private space and the embodiment of listening to radio. The radio we have chosen is a "cathedral" style shaped radio, a popular aesthetic during the

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<sup>19</sup> If this link no longer works, you can contact me at philp.a.miletic@gmail.com



1930s. The radio body and its parts (a few are missing) are all original from the 1931 model, except for the dial knob which was replaced with another Philco radio knob (model and date unknown), the speaker, the volume potentiometer, and the dial potentiometer. When the dial knob is turned, the movement between “book stations” is indicated by the movement of a dial scale, which is moved by a servo motor, ensuring that that movement between people reading is embodied in the materiality of the radio. This embodiment of people reading in the materiality of the radio draws attention to the ways readers’ presence is tied to the radio and participants’ interactivity with the radio, producing a more dialogic dynamic than a recording or a collage-recording would do. Additionally, the materiality of the 1930s models is important because of its immobility. 1930s and earlier models were not mobile because of their size and sensitive, fragile vacuum tubes and batteries. As a result, the radio was a fixture within the domestic private space that an individual had to sit by and actively listen. By the 1950s, the transistor radio and car radios made the practice of listening to radio less domestic and more public and mobile, although I am not suggesting that active listening was obsolesced. But making participants sit down and lean in to the radio significantly foregrounds the way this kind of radio model coerces individuals to actively listen, the centrality of the radio in a private space, and the intimacy that this intersection of active listening and private space creates.

What the radio demonstrates further is the differing varieties of tonalities, inflections, and struggles when reading Stein, pluralizing the text while also juxtaposing these voices together in order to draw attention to the democratic poetics of Stein that invite inclusivity and diversity. In addition to my observations, I also asked collaborators to respond to the question, “Describe your experience reading Stein.” Most of the collaborators—who all have pseudonyms in this paper—had either never read Stein before or read very little long ago. The responses reinforce what I

gathered from listening to the recording: the experience was not only auto/biographical, in an oral and embodied way, but also gave the sense of being exposed or vulnerable towards the other. Of course, participants are not *writing*, so I prefer the term automedia, as Julie Rak understands it, to open up auto/biography to the oral/aural practices of Stein and the radio installation. Julie Rak broadens the concept of “automediality” that Smith and Watson present in *Reading Autobiography* to take into account the multimedia environments of digital interfaces that include writing, images, and other new media practices. Rak writes, “I am suggesting ‘automediality’ as a useful term for naming both the product (media about a maker) and the process (the process of mediating the self, or auto)” (161). Recently, Ümit Kennedy and Emma Maguire have proposed to think of automedia “as a framework or approach to studying not only new media life stories, but the auto/biographical practices as they are enacted in a range of media forms, analogue and digital alike” (n.p). Slightly retooling Rak’s theorization, Kennedy and Maguire argue that the study of automedia examines “both the *process* of mediation and the *product* (i.e. the autobiographical subjects and text)” (n.p.; original emphasis). Although automedia does not include the slash (or bio) of “auto/biography,” I keep in mind the slash’s emphasis on the fluidity and relationality between self and others (Smith and Watson 256). Automedia affords critical discussions of the relationality between self and medium, the mediated self and others, and the self and mediated others. Thus, “automediality” allows me to discuss both the process of collaborators sounding themselves and the product of their audio in relation to identity formation. Drawing from these observations of the radio installation in addition to collaborators’ responses, I present *Everybody’s Autobiography* as a radiotext that attempts to recreate the kinds of community that Stein experienced when on the radio and the role of automedia in creating this sense of community.

In this chapter, I argue that the inclusivity that Stein's grammar invites is foregrounded and more pronounced when read orally and heard aurally. This inclusivity is not just inviting those reading into the meaning-making of the text; rather, the oral reading of the book also draws attention to the multiple voices within the text that myself and collaborators had to acknowledge and navigate. Moreover, the collaborators' readings, in addition to meaning making through their oral emphasis, aurally provide micro-narrative auto/biographies through their affective vocal assertion of their self in relation to the text and the environment in which they are reading. This navigation through others' voices that myself and collaborators felt is reflective of the movement in Stein's text, which is further likened to the installation's participants' movement of the radio dial to move through the voices of the project. Together, Stein's democratic poetics of inclusivity and the auto/biographical utterances of myself and collaborators do draw attention to the "kinds of community" that Stein aims to capture in *Everybody's Autobiography*. Much more than one-to-one relationality between Stein and Toklas in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, *Everybody's Autobiography* is about the reception of Stein's work and the reciprocity of others, as well as the ways she has shaped and has been shaped by others. Thus, I will close my analysis with the ways that *Everybody's Autobiography* places emphasis on community and a community's involvement in the continual shaping of individuals' identity through its openness and vulnerability. I draw attention to the ways in which Stephen and mine's radio installation, the work we shared together and with others, and the vulnerability and openness of myself and our collaborators established a community that imagines the kinds of community Stein experienced on the air.

**Democratizing the aether: "the written language says something and says it different"**

Throughout chapter one of *Everybody's Autobiography*, one of the topics that Stein is preoccupied with is writing and writers. In particular, there is one passage that reflects on the written language in English and how it holds a possibility for influencing orality, how language is spoken. In this passage, she notes the difference between the language that is written and the language that is spoken, and how this has changed since modernity. She writes,

Now the English language I said has gone just the other way, they always tried to write like anybody talked and it is only comparatively lately that it is true that the written language knows that that is of no interest and cannot be done that is to write as anybody talks *because what anybody talks because everybody talks as the newspapers and movies and radios tell them to talk the spoken language is no longer interesting* and so gradually *the written language says something and says it different* than the spoken language...So soon we will come to have a written language that is a thing apart in English (13-14; my emphasis)

What Stein argues above may appear contradictory, especially in my and others' arguments that orality is central to Stein's writing. But Stein's concern is not that writing should *not* write like anybody talked; rather, she is troubled by writing trying to be like a spoken language that is *standardized*. As I argued in the previous chapter, the late 1920s and the 1930s witnessed an increase in commercial interests in radio, leading to standardization of the English language and the homogenizing of the aether. Writing, then, is a means of resisting this standardization that is spoken in the cinema, film, and newspaper; it invites (or should invite) an orality and aurality of difference. In other words, written language should *say* something and say it different.

Stein, then, challenges those conventions and standardizations of the spoken language represented in mass media in and through her writing. She is addressing and critiquing the

cultural fears that erase the inclusivity of the spoken language that radio can potentially bring to the public. Although orality/aurality is a common thread throughout Stein's writing, the context of this orality/aurality is important. Radio, in the book, contextualizes the orality/aurality to emphasize the plurality and inclusivity of the spoken language. Thus, *Everybody's Autobiography* seeks to invite a plurality of voices to fill the text, within the text and without. To demonstrate this point, I turn to the collaborators' responses to reading Stein's text.

The plurality of voices that fill the text is foregrounded when the text is read out loud, challenging the collaborators to "read with the ears" while also maintaining to "read with the eyes" (EA 18); that is, the visuality of the text challenges how collaborators read *and* hear the text. Common amongst the collaborators' responses was the struggle of reading Stein aloud, a response not uncommon when discussing Stein's work. Their struggle was marked by a feeling of not having control over the text and of being overwhelmed by the long, sparsely punctuated sentences. As one collaborator, Anthony, notes "Stumbling through the chapter was like stumbling through people. The process felt both jarring and strangely welcoming at the same time." The simultaneous feeling of being jarred and yet welcomed suggests that Anthony's sense of self was jarred or ajar, challenged by Stein's text that he describes as stumbling through people (and not just Stein). Anthony's recording featured many attempts in starting over or frustrated utterances directed at himself and at the text. In his written response and in his recording, he describes the vulnerability of reading Stein, but that vulnerability is pluralized and formed in relation to the people (or the people's' voices) that fill the text. Stumbling, however, suggests a learning curve, a process of regaining a foothold in a dance that, as Harriet Chessman argues, readers of Stein are invited to. Chessman writes, "Stein's attempt is to shape us into readers who come to her writing as equal lovers or intimate acquaintances, separate but always

open to the possibility of ‘coming together’” (Chessman 8). As Chessman notes, it is intimacy that is felt when reading Stein. And this feeling of intimacy is what creates the sense of vulnerability that was felt by Anthony and by other participants. The collaborators, however, never fully come together, although I do not think that Chessman implies this. But rather, they come together but remain separate, intimately vulnerable without absorption.

Thus, what Anthony and other collaborators felt when reading *Everybody's Autobiography* is not a loss of identity or control but the feeling of an identity being made or brought forth in relation to Stein and the others in her text. In collaborators' descriptions of invited stumbling, most of them note the ways in which they overcame the struggle of reading Stein by asserting themselves, or, perhaps better put, finding themselves in relation to spoken language. Myra, writes, “Once you get a sense of Stein's syntax and start imposing commas where we would conventionally put commas, the text is very readable.” (Myra). Edith writes, “it was nice to find a rhythm and not to worry so much about punctuation” (Edith). And another collaborator, Ray, puts it, “reading Stein out loud felt like a return to elementary school and learning how to read all over again...as I learned to negotiate Stein's prose” (Ray). What I want to note is that it is reading Stein orally that these re-examinations of the self in relation to language occur. What these responses draw attention to are the differing kinds of negotiation that occur orally/aurally between the collaborator, the text, and Stein. Gathering a sense of Stein's syntax, Myra imposes onto the text, placing commas where she normally would. Edith, contrary to Myra, finds a rhythm that suits her and does not worry about punctuation whatsoever. And Ray finds that he is re-learning language, (re)investigating his relationship to language. In fact, each of these responses are assertions of each collaborators' language. As Chessman argues, “Stein holds out the possibility for a utopian mode of relationship to the world and to language,

in which one's difference from an other is as valuable and undestructive as one's similarity or near-mergence" (4). Though Mrya may write that she imposed conventional grammar, she still struggled to completely do so as is evident in the recording. And besides, their imposition of conventional grammar is her sense of language just as much as rhythm is more important to Edith's sense of language. Or Ray felt he was relearning his language all over again. As a first-time reader of Stein who went into reading their chapter cold, Elizabeth, succinctly states, reading *Everybody's Autobiography* "definitely made reading a bit of a challenge because I wasn't sure where I should pause, or place emphasis, but, after a while, I got used to the fluidity and it almost felt as if she left it up to the reader to decide how they wanted to read each sentence."

The reason that these responses are particularly important in the context of *Everybody's Autobiography*—as opposed to Stein's previous works—is that they draw attention to the affective intensity of othering that Stein felt after the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and during her tour of America. This intensity, I argue, is paralleled by the increasing popularity and audiences of radio, which heightened the awareness of sociality, of being part of a networked public. While Chapter One partly focused on writing and the role of writing to resist standardization, Chapter Two—aptly titled "What Was The Effect Upon Me Of The Autobiography"—is about the othering and vulnerability that publicity introduces to Stein. Stein had not experienced the kind of popularity and publicity before *The Autobiography*, although she was known locally in Paris for the salons she hosted at her 27 Rue de Fleurus apartment. She describes her popularity as "upsetting" because it then began to have commercial value (40). But as Spahr rightly points out, Stein's concerns about money are rather complicated because of her "desires of bourgeois assimilation" (49). Indeed, Stein comments later on in the chapter how nice

it was to buy a new car, clothes, and a dog since previously in her younger age, she and Toklas had lived without much money and lived modestly. The concern for Stein, then, was not the fact that her work had commercial value per se; rather, her concern is directed towards the vulnerability of a public that, more or less, decides whether or not her works have value (both commercial and cultural).

The publicity that the *Autobiography* introduced to Stein also rushed in an intensity of voices directed towards her and her works that she had never experienced before. Stein writes, “You are you because your little dog knows you, but when your public knows you and does not want to pay for you and when your public knows you and does want to pay for you, you are not the same you” (EA 46). Stein’s “you are you because your little dog knows you” refers to the intimacy of close relationships, the kinds of relationships she experienced at her salons in her Paris; but with public attention, everybody knows you in various ways, introducing Stein to the ways she had to constantly negotiate between others and self. Stein states that “One of the things that interested me most is all the conversations I had after I wrote the *Autobiography*” (EA 43). But those conversations were always ones of critique and challenge and argument. She notes that Matisse and Tristan Tzara critiqued the *Autobiography*, arguing that she was lying; that Alice B. Toklas did not think the *Autobiography* was going to be a success; that she and her brother had an argument about her writing and her publicity; and in the previous chapter, she notes that the *Autobiography* caused Picasso’s wife (later divorced) to leave the room, and the end of the same chapter escalates to an argument between Stein and Picasso that ends their frequent visits.

This kind of critique existed before. Karin Cope cites numerous misogynistic attacks on Stein, including those made by Wyndham Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, Tzara, and Eliot. But throughout Stein’s writing, she is anxious about the increasing risk of vulnerability that publicity



introduces. Aiden Thompson points out that “[p]art of what Stein rethinks between 1923 and 1935 is the notion of narrative and this rethinking has to do with how conventions of identity (like conventions of writing) are yoked to habituated practices that supply us with a ‘language’ from which we narrate ourselves” (130). Stein’s rethinking of the intimate relationship between language and identity (or self-expression) is a result of the kinds of “value” that was attributed to Stein’s language and herself, collapsing these two together—the reception of her writing was also the reception of who she was. Stein argues that “The thing is like this, it is all the question of identity. It is all a question of the outside being outside and the inside being inside. As long as the outside does not put a value on you it remains outside but when it does put a value on you then it gets inside or rather if the outside puts a value on you then all your inside gets to be outside” (EA 48). Stein describes the intertwining of self and others, that there is no longer a clear division between a self and others; she describes the relationality of identity and the affective response to it that shapes language.

The effect of the *Autobiography* is an affective exposure to an outside, a public; a jarring of Stein’s sense of self and language. As Stein anxiously writes, “All this time I did no writing...I began to worry about identity, I had always been I because I had words that had to be written inside me” (EA 66). Thus, she struggles with, in her words, not losing her inside, to manage the relations between the inside and the outside, between the self’s language and the other’s language. This is not just Stein’s anxiety, however, but is an anxiety that defines modernity brought upon by the increased scale of sociality towards mass culture which led to feelings of isolation and alienation. If “[a]nything is an autobiography” (EA 3) and is “easy for any one” (4), then the effects and affects of autobiography that Stein felt is, in her opinion, being felt by everybody. Rather than an individualist act, she views the autobiographical process as a means of

overcoming the fear of isolation and alienation, to reflect on the self and the others which define the self. Hence, the collaborators' responses that describe negotiating Stein's prose, between Stein and their self and between the presence of others in the text. Juliana Spahr argues that Stein's grammar is one of inclusivity as opposed to Standard English grammar's exclusivity, and the radio installation illuminates this point as you listen to the variety of collaborators find and feel their rhythm in the text. The collaborators were no longer simply reading the text, nor were they passive; instead, these collaborators were authoring or co-authoring the text as they struggled *with* Stein.

None of the collaborators noted that they felt passive or disconnected by the text or completely absorbed by Stein's control over the text. Instead, they felt they had to connect with the text, project themselves into the text while also acknowledging the limitations of control they have over the text. Spahr puts it this way: "Stein's works are not subversive, as is often assumed, but are rather connective. They connect with readers. They deny authorial authority and instead encourage readers to be their own authors" (Spahr 40-41). For participants, "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" concretizes Spahr's claims by foregrounding various readers accessible to the participant; for collaborators, being "on air" coaxed collaborators to "just read" the text as opposed to pausing and dwelling on how to read the text; and, moreover, the radio of "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" contextualizes *Everybody's Autobiography* as a radiotext. While some collaborators read the recording in one take, others read their contribution in one or two sittings, pausing only to grab a drink or, in one or two cases, to catch the bus and conclude their contribution in the following recording session. None of the recordings are edited, thus foregrounding their process through the text rather than shaping their contribution into only a product. As readers listened to the text or listened to themselves reading the text, they began to

author the text as their own, and this process can be heard throughout the recordings. As collaborator David concludes in his comments to me, “I felt fatigued by my creation.” This brief comment alludes to that sense of authorship and its affect that Spahr and Cope argue is part of reading Stein, but it also refers to that anxiety and affective intensity of negotiating the self’s language in relation to others’ languages. Reading Stein is a bodily, affective response, as other collaborators noted in conversation. But it is also exhausting because of the intensity of managing the connective relations between self and other that Stein invites in *Everybody’s Autobiography*. What the collaborators felt was similar to the feelings Stein conveys when writing about publicity, about the relationship between an inside and an outside.

This vulnerability and intimacy that Stein feels and is felt by collaborators in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, as well as the negotiation between self and others, form the basis of her democratic poetics. The connective writing of Stein invites others and others’ voices into the text, affording inclusivity. Aiden Thompson importantly points out that Stein’s concept of democracy was developed and articulated in her lectures in America (collected as *Lectures in America*), specifically her talk, “Portraits and Repetition.” Her distinction between *repetition* and *insistence* in that essay lends to understanding her concept of democratic poetics. She writes, “repetition that is if you like the *repeating that is the same thing*, but once started expressing this thing, expressing any thing *there can be no repetition* because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis” (167; my emphasis). Insistence is repetition with an emphasis, and everybody, even if they are saying the same thing, places a different kind of emphasis. Insistence is heard in “Everybody *Everybody’s Autobiography*” not only between different collaborators of the same chapter but also within

each collaborators' reading when encountering repeated phrases. Thompson argues, “[b]ecoming aware of the impossibility of repeating exactly opens a space not determined by automatic ingrained routine, allowing one choice and agency....She [Stein] provides a valuable practice—one that is democratic in its undoing of hierarchical mechanism” (130-31). As I have already noted with previous collaborators responses, each of them felt agency in making sense of the text. But rather than each finding the same meaning, the same kind of language, their agency to sound Stein's text led to them re-learning language that was more embodied. Dani, a collaborator, writes, “I do feel that reading that much Stein aloud and all at once has really messed with my comprehension and use of language.” Dani draws attention to the ways in which Stein unworks language in order to invite inclusive approaches to language that do not privilege one approach over the other.

*Everybody's Autobiography* is less about Stein herself and rather about the people she surrounds herself with and the people she meets on her travels; it is about the reception of her work and the reciprocity between herself and others. From celebrities and friends to servants and strangers, the book is filled with stories of these people and their conversations with Stein. But what brings about the affective intensity that facilitates democracy is *mobility*, specifically Stein's mobility. Writing on *Everybody's Autobiography*, Spahr points out, “Rather than focusing on the singular name, this work is centred on the multiple, the mobile, the names of ‘everybody’” (Spahr 37). But the book is not simply name dropping, as some may think; everybody speaks, as well. This feature of *Everybody's Autobiography* and the level of its intensity is slightly disorienting because of the lack of punctuation and inverted commas, causing my fellow collaborators and myself to navigate the he said she saids and differentiate who's speaking via sound, such as through our own intonations, inflections, and conversational pauses.

Take this conversation between Stein and a man: “well I said, yes he said, what happened I said, she is dead he said but she has just come I said yes I know he said but she is dead. Oh yes I said well I am very sorry I said yes he said, well I said, how did she die, well he said well you come and see Madame Cesar, certainly I said but how did she die....” (84). Without any line breaks and consistent comma usage, it is sometimes difficult to visually differentiate who is speaking. But what might appear visually in Stein’s text as broadcasting, as one voice speaking and appropriating others, is otherwise when oral: collaborators note often that even though they found a rhythm, that rhythm was soon dislodged and had to be found again. Contrary to Pound’s modernist slogan “make it new,” Stein’s “to begin at the beginning” acknowledges the making anew and difference in everyday language. The oral mobility of the collaborators’ reading continually invites difference through insistence, using intonation and emphasis to differentiate and acknowledge others speaking in the text.

The mobility of Stein’s writing and of the collaborators’ readings demonstrate Stein’s democratic poetics, but also frame her poetics as an adaptation of William James’ philosophy of pragmatism. As Thompson points out, Stein had worked with James as he was writing and theorizing pragmatism. Although James does not have a clear-cut definition of pragmatism, he argues that pragmatism “is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses, and to count the humblest and most personal experiences” (“What Pragmatism Means” n.p.). He understood a pragmatist as turning away from “abstraction and fixed principles” and towards “concreteness and adequacy” (n.p.). Thompson draws attention to the ways in which Stein adopts James’s philosophy and modifies it in a way to craft her own democratic poetics. Thompson writes,

Pragmatism and ‘romance,’ then, foster a new democratic paradigm in which qualities of the feminine are accentuated and valued. However, Stein takes a step beyond James by applying his theory of consciousness to writing. In her focus on writing, she stresses the intimacy between text and reader, thereby providing a praxis in which the precepts of pragmatism—*embodiment, fluidity, and immersion in the immediate details of the world*—are enacted and embodied through reader participation. Stein’s democratic praxis underscores the way fragmentation can assist in re-assessing habituated social norms and in undoing the hierarchical and binary mechanisms that encourage distrust and contention. (131-32; my emphasis)

Romance, in this context, refers to Stein’s definition of it as “the play between the reader’s ability to read...and the reader’s inability to read” (Thompson 130). Rather than approaching the fragmentation and supposed alienation of modernity with anxiety, Stein figures fragmentation as *not* alienating but rather affording plurality and connective possibilities within the heightened sociality of sonic modernity.

Stein’s mobility in *Everybody’s Autobiography* is fluid and immersed in the immediate present; she connects with everyone but she is also decentered through these constant encounters with others. Throughout the text, Stein mentions “Now I am still out walking” (*EA* 12), and there is Chapter Four’s descriptions of car rides, train rides, and plane rides as she moves throughout America. Stein frequently uses “now” to note the presentness of the text, and she notes at one point in that text that she is writing nowness: “Now I am writing about what is which is being existing” (258). She even concludes the book with “and now it is today,” maintaining the presentness throughout the entirety of the text (328). Maintaining the presentness of the text is a means of conveying an embodied fluidity and immediacy to *Everybody’s Autobiography* and

aligns the text with the radio's protocols of embodied fluidity and immediacy. So, unlike reading the text, participants at the radio installation—even the collaborators noted this—are not able to return to earlier in the text, they can only listen to “what is which is being existing.”

Nowness, in Stein's writing and in radio's aurality, is a means of having everybody come together without sameness. Nowness suggests insistence and differentiation rather than habituated repetition and sameness. And Thompson's quote above illustrates that the pragmatism of Stein is not confined to her alone. Rather, her pragmatism is enacted and embodied by her readers. In addition to the noted instances of oral insistence, collaborators also noted an embodied and affective insistence to the text. Like David wrote, “I felt fatigued by my creation.” But in noting that fatigue, other collaborators draw attention to the movements of their body. Ray writes, “One interesting product of the reading was that I found myself responding kinesthetically to the prose, using my free hand to gesture and point out emphasis as I wove along a sentence; I felt like a conductor waving musicians through a score. It seems that the gesturing helped me find my own rhythm and melodic path through the prose, even though the content was strictly Stein's.” Alice notes, “I read through the whole chapter in one take, pausing a few times to stretch my legs, arms and voice.” And Chernoff comments that reading *Everybody Autobiography* “forced me to engage with the limitations of my own tired and tiring throat.” Even the book, by one collaborator, was described as mobile: “At first, I read a few paragraphs and then the book, feigning trickster, fell onto the computer keyboard, halting the recording process as if to contest my continued need for a smooth clarity” (Kate). If *Everybody's Autobiography*, as a collaborator, Xavier, puts it, is “probably the most conversational autobiography I've ever read,” it is not just restricted to an oral conversation; it is a conversation between bodies, fluid and immersed in the immediate presence.

The responses above note that reading orally is intricately tied to embodiment, that it brings an awareness of the reader's body and the body's relation to others, even if the audience is not "there there" (EA 298). Alice interestingly notes that not only did she have to stretch her arms and legs, but she also had to stretch her voice. Chernoff's comment builds upon Alice's response by noting that he became aware of his limitations, and yet Alice and Chernoff only became aware of this by stretching that voice and exposing it to a vulnerability it had never felt before. But just as collaborators were aware of others in the text, they were also bodily aware of a potential listening public. Ray had to move his body to help him flow through the text and place emphasis/insistence, but he also saw this bodily response as being a response to the presence of others. Even I caught myself looking up from the book while reading only to meet an audience that was there but not there. The potentiality of others listening affected reading, marking an embodied affective awareness of a public within the privacy of the recording rooms. And moreover, this awareness countered any feelings of solipsism that radio broadcasters, in the beginning of radio, felt while speaking on the air.<sup>20</sup> The awareness of a public, of others listening, that collaborators and myself felt is like Stein's (and others') at the radio, feeling as if she was filled with everybody listening. What these collaborator responses note is that it is an awareness that decenters the self. In Ehrman's response, the book is depicted as *resisting* their complete control, literally falling out of their hands. The fatigue felt by collaborators and myself is the result of the resistance of Stein's text, which prompts collaborators to actively engage and struggle with the text, coercing participants' openness.

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<sup>20</sup> See Peters: "the unknown listeners, the lack of interaction, the speaking into the air—replicate the larger fears of solipsism and communication breakdown raging the art, literature, and philosophy of the interwar years" (214).



It is at the site of resistance wherein Stein's democratic poetics come to the fore; that site is located within the private space, but it is a privacy that is shaped by a public. As Zizi Papacharissi argues, "[t]he contemporary citizen adopts a personally devised definition of the political, and becomes politically emancipated in private, rather than public, spaces, thus developing a new civic vernacular" (*A Private Sphere* 19). That civic vernacular, for Stein, is located within the blurring boundaries between an inside and an outside, of a self and a public. Stein's democratic poetics is one that resists, but it is this resistance that provokes *insistence*. Listening to collaborators on the radio and easily switching between them illuminate the various insurances that emerge from the resistance. For instance, "Toklas" is pronounced in numerous ways—talklos, talk less, tooklas, taklos, Tokles, Tok-tok-toklas. Even within one person's reading, different pronunciations emerge, and you can hear the collaborators feeling for a way to say a particular word each time they return to it. Thus, none of the collaborators sound the same. Rather, as Spahr argues about *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein "distances the specific from everyone in an attempt to create an egalitarian inclusion that does not smother...It is a conception of community that is not bound with sameness of nation, race, sexuality, or gender, but rather with the moments that everybody has when they *feel* they do not fit" (Spahr 40; my emphasis). When reading Stein, the collaborators never felt that they had fit, they never quite found a rhythm or a way of reading that worked for the majority of their reading; rather, they struggled, and continued to struggle as they navigated the prose as if they were navigating conversations with others. Democracy and community, as Spahr rightly points out, is not about being comfortable with like-minded individuals; they are deliberative, othering, and vulnerable, a discomfort that emerges when acknowledging and engaging with others.

The radio installation also demonstrates the multiple and the mobile in *Everybody's Autobiography* and illuminates why this multiplicity and mobility is demonstrative of radio and the democratic potential that Stein and others saw or “heard” in it. The process of tuning, listening, and seeing the dial scales rotate gives a sense of a network that a participant at the installation is part of. Although radio is typically thought of as a broadcast medium, other modernists like Bertolt Brecht and the Bloomsbury group, believed in radio’s democratic potential, not only in the sense that a diversity of people can talk but also that a diversity of people can listen in. Listening was seen as an active form of participation and contribution. Because participants can tune the radio, moving from book station to book station, the mobility and multiplicity of the text is foregrounded. Stein conveys this feeling of listening to radio, of the mobility and multiplicity that “tuning” invites, in *Everybody's Autobiography* when she moves so effortlessly between people and their conversations. Participants at the installation are like DXers, a term to describe people who would search the airwaves for the furthest stations and new sounds. As a result, Stein’s movement throughout the text and participants’ active engagement in searching for different stations—their movement through the aether, as represented by the dial scales—accretes a fragmented and yet connected multiplicity to the text as more voices are introduced. The radio installation, then, foregrounds the affective, democratic publics that Stein felt and imagined when listening and speaking on the radio by filling *Everybody's Autobiography* with voices, a text that is already filled with voices but may remain unnoticed when not oral. While the content is not necessarily political, it is that inherent politicalness of affect that Stein pushes towards democratic feeling in the ways that the text is decentered and multivocal, moving (both affectively and aurally), and characterized by an openness to variation.

### **The Automedia of Everybody: “perhaps I am not I even if my little dog knows me”**

But within the collaborators’ and my own creations, our voices that fill Stein’s text and are filled by Stein, are micro-auto/biographies that emerge out of their oral recitation and are foregrounded by the radio installation. I would like to begin with one particular response from Edith that I found illustrates the kinds of auto/biographies that emerged out of this project. She writes, “and though Phil writes in the margin ‘what an ego’ i liked her confidence...i wish i could be more like Gertrude.” When collaborators read for me, I offered an epub copy, a hardcover library copy, or my own personal paperback copy with my marginal notations from some years back. Edith read my own personal copy, as the quote suggests. And it is interesting to note that she mentions that she continued to glance at my marginal notes, wanting to read them with the text. Edith’s response made me reflect on that comment about Stein’s ego, about why I had made it. I remember being puzzled by her repeated insistence of her genius, not knowing why she did so. And it is Edith’s comment, in addition to Aiden Thompson’s argument about Stein’s repeated use of “genius,” that made me realize that the repeated self-appointment of “genius” is anything but a gesture of an “ego” and put me in my place. As Thompson argues, Stein “revises the habitual gender constructs, which understand ‘genius’ as masculine and elitist, and opens pathways that are inclusive and democratic” (130). Edith’s response reflects on the kinds of gender oppression, whether direct or indirect, that she has experienced and continues to experience in her life. Note, as well, that Edith changes my “ego” into “confidence.” Not only does Edith see Stein’s confidence as a revision of ‘genius’ being male, she sees this confidence as an admirable trait of Stein’s. Within Edith’s admiration of Stein’s confidence, there is an auto/biographical moment wherein she reveals a narrative about herself: she wishes that she, too, can have confidence like Stein in order to challenge and overcome the kinds of gender

oppressions she encounters daily, to dare to have confidence when patriarchal narratives say otherwise.

But what makes that confidence challenging is that female confidence is often construed as “egotistical,” as my past marginal notes unfortunately demonstrate. Stein’s male peers called her much worse: “Fat Bitch? Lousy Bitch? Old Bitch?...What is the modifying adjective that would improve it” (Hemingway qtd in Cope 140); “a huge, lowering, dogmatic Child” (Wyndham Lewis qtd in Cope 143); “naïvely intellectualizing” (Ezra Pound qtd in Cope 149). Even some male scholars I have met describe reading Stein as a hateful and cruel process, much to my disagreement. But what Edith’s auto/biographical comment showed me was that my marginal comment, “what an ego,” still contributed to the downplaying and/or trivializing of women’s confidence, expressions of confidence, and work. My marginal note was no better than those “worse” comments. Thus, in Edith’s own comments is a confident resistance against my own reading; she fulfills her wish to be “more like Gertrude” by asserting her own interpretation of Stein’s repetition of her genius, while also placing great importance on this insistence that challenges patriarchal constructions of who a ‘genius’ is. Edith’s response and her reading displays the kind of confidence that she finds admirable in Stein and wishes she can have herself.

The exchange between Edith, *Everybody’s Autobiography*, my marginalia (my past self), and my (present) self importantly draws attention to the auto/biographical relationality that emerged out of this project. The emergence of these auto/biographical narratives is a result of an affective response to the text: Edith admired Stein’s confidence and felt it was important to her, while noting that my dismissive marginal notes bothered her. Both Stein’s text and my marginal notes affected her in such a way to reflect on her life and on her confidence in her life. Likewise, I was affected by Edith’s comment: I reflected on my “what an ego” comment and realized its

dismissiveness, despite aligning myself as someone who enjoys Stein's work (while also acknowledging the challenge and, at times, frustration of grappling with her texts). This affective but also dialogical process of "reflection" in auto/biography is what Susanna Egan calls "mirror talk": "that 'encounter of two lives' between reader and writer of 'life,' repeated both outside and inside the text" (3). It is an encounter "in which the biographer is also an autobiographer" (7). Egan's analogy of a mirror is, as she admits herself, problematic because it does not necessarily acknowledge the agency of the other and it also restricts relationality to one-to-one. But the relationality that Egan articulates succinctly characterizes the relationality experienced in "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*." Narration, Egan writes, "takes the form of dialogue; it becomes interactive, and (auto)biographical identification becomes reciprocal, adaptive, corrective, affirmative" (7). Stein's narration afforded Edith with auto/biographical identification, which was prompted by the affective response to my marginal notes. This affective response, itself, was narrated in her written response to me, which affected me to reflect on my past and present self's understanding of Stein and her insistence on her genius. My affective response is narrated here. This exchange contains all of the elements that Egan attributes to mirror talk: reciprocity (between Edith, the text, and myself), adaptative (Edith's adaptation of Stein's confidence; my adaptation of Edith's comment), corrective (I correct my understanding of Stein's insistence of her genius, and Edith corrects her confidence), and affirmative (Edith affirms her confidence, and I affirm my error).

What is important to stress is that relationality is not, despite Egan's mirror analogy, a one-to-one relationship but is rather a many-to-many network in *Everybody's Autobiography*. This is also the case in Chapter 5's *Infinite Summer*. In a way, then, this dissertation focuses on the complex relational selves that (post)modernity afford. Although one to one relationships

exist, it seems that both Stein and Wallace, including their respective contemporaries, are grappling with the complexity of the relational self in a heightened sociality. The auto/biographies that emerge from the radio installation are not limited to the relationality between the text and others; rather, the environment in which the readers read in also contribute to these micro oral/aural auto/biographies as well. Each reading is contextual; each reader's identity is shaped by that context. Narration, then, includes both the oral (what is being spoken) and the aural (what is heard within the radio) and is not limited to the written responses of collaborators. Cope argues that "to say the words aloud is to have made, already, a set of interpretive decisions about accent, intonation, scansion; in short, to have engaged the words—or Stein—in some sort of *animation*. And that—animation—is perhaps above all the task, the dream, the goal and the risk of any passionate collaboration" (Cope 11; original emphasis). This animation is marked by "affective states induced and introduced by the process of reading" (Cope 8). But in their collaboration with Stein, the accent, intonation, scansion, pronunciation, and their placement of imposing commas reveal a little bit about the collaborators themselves, about their cultural backgrounds, their sense of humour, their sense of who they are.

The oral/aural auto/biographies of "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" may seem unwarranted because the content is not their own. But Stein, in her 1934 lecture "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans" offers a counterpoint. She writes,

I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the

thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different. (138)

Stein draws attention to a listening that is not necessarily attentive to the content—the words themselves—but rather to the *movement* of thoughts and words. In Stein’s view, we all say the same kinds of things in our everyday lives, especially in the banalities of small talk. But it is the movement of these words that create an affective variation that makes their utterance endlessly different and unique.

Thus, it is the movement—the affective variation—of collaborators’ thoughts and words that is auto/biographical. Rather than attending to what is said (the content), I pay attention to the ways in which the movement of the content varies from reader to reader. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, playing with the title of Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, argue, “autobiographical storytelling has played a major role in the making of Americans and the making, unmaking, and remaking of ‘America’” (*Getting a Life* 4). To expand upon Smith and Watson’s argument, the *oral/aural* recitations in “Everybody’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*” make, unmake, and remake *Everybody’s Autobiography* in relation to their self. Most of the collaborators adopted a different reading voice than their typical speaking voice, and yet their voice is identifiable in the way that a radio host is identifiable by their vocal traits. Whether they intended to or not, each collaborator’s reading is an oral performance of their identity, of how they would like to be heard by others or how they think others will hear them. A few collaborators adopted a “storytelling voice”: a slow and steady reading pace that is well articulated, carefully pronounced, and distinct from their regular conversational voice. One collaborator’s French pronunciation was very articulate, revealing a French-Canadian background. Others, who were not as fluent in French, still attempted to pronounce the French “properly,” slowing their reading pace as they approach

the French word and either paused for a minute before saying the word or saying the word twice to ensure it was properly pronounced. These readers were perhaps the most aware of their reading as a performance. Their slow pace and proper articulation recalls Lesley Wheeler's argument about Edna St. Vincent Millay's similar oral reading practices as a performance of middle class white identity. These well-articulated performances of identity by these particular collaborators are rooted in their upbringing, education, and conceptions (whether conscious or not) of orality and its relationship to identity.

In contrast, other collaborators' readings were marked by a nervousness, anxiety, and/or a feeling of not reading properly. Several collaborators apologized to me after reading, noting that they probably sounded terrible, that they hated their voice (I am one included), and/or that reading Stein was exhausting, an "endurance test" (Alice). Cassie writes, "I know I made a lot of errors, but tried to pay attention to the punctuation. I failed miserably, but A for effort, right???" Whereas some collaborators asserted and performed an articulate, middle-class white orality, Cassie's response and others like it reflected on not being able to achieve a normative reading. In Cassie's recording, however, while there is stumbling (or, as Cassie hears herself, "errors") in the beginning, the majority of the reading sounds natural for Cassie, having no more stumbling than those who performed that articulated identity. One particular collaborator, Jason, whose reading is also marked by a nervousness in the beginning of his recording, liked Stein's analogy that her writing is "clear as mud" (*EA* 126). Mud is by no means "clear" and it is usually resistant ("sticky") when walking through it. But, as Jason points out, Stein finishes this analogy with "but mud settles and clear streams run on and disappear." In both Jason's and Cassie's recordings, their nervousness is in response to feeling "stuck" in the text, unable to perform a "proper" reading. But as they read on, the mud settled, they no longer felt stuck—stuck in the text *and*



stuck by norms of oral articulation—and began to settle in their own voices, their voices practically unchanged from their conversational voice. They had, whether they consciously felt it or not, grown comfortable with their orality and thus the identity they performed “on the air.”

And then there are those who revelled in their stumbling, mispronunciations, and struggles with reading the text. Jon, whose reading is far from “error”-less, responded that “I do enjoy reading aloud though, so it was very fun!” Their response echoes similar comments from collaborators, who exclaim that they had fun. Jon acknowledges the struggles with reading Stein, but their confidence in their voice, vocal tics and all, and the fun they have with reading orally can be heard in the recording. Dani, whose experience is perhaps one of the more humorous ones, nicely sums up this confident revelling in Stein’s text: “This was a really funny experience for me. My favourite part was that, owing to all the French proper nouns at the start of this chapter, I for some reason decided that Basket was pronounced “Bas-kay” and I did that a few times before I realized my mistake and *by then I felt I had committed to the weird pronunciation so I just went with it.*” (my emphasis). Note that Dani does not write “mispronunciation” but rather describes her pronunciation as “weird,” as in “other than the norm.” Despite discovering this fact, Dani “just went with it,” resisting the urge to enforce Standard English pronunciation. Throughout *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein writes that “identity is funny” (70). The funny thing about identity, to Stein, is that “you are of course never yourself” (70). Dani’s feeling of being committed to her “weird pronunciation” of Basket as “Bas-kay” comes from an awareness of others listening, and so she kept it consistent so that she could keep the oral performance of her identity performance consistent. But even her resistance is an awareness of the potentiality of others’ correcting her. Thus, even though the commitment to “Bas-key” may appear, in some way, as a conservative approach in maintaining a consistent identity, it involves a risk in her

identity being scrutinized as “mispronounced.” Identity, as it functions orally and how it is heard aurally in “Everybody’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*,” is both fun and funny; that is, there are elements of play and performance within each collaborators’ reading but it is also funny in the ways they are never themselves but always aware of others.

The auto/biographical auralities/oralities, however, are not limited to disembodied voices. These voices are embodied. Their embodiment is not limited to the materiality of the radio; rather, their embodiment is also heard. Harriet Chessman argues that reading Stein is a coming together, writing that “[t]his potentially erotic coming together of reading and writing marks a responsiveness on the reader’s part which is both bodily and imaginative” (2). Across the readings of “Everybody’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*,” bodily affective states emerge—a giggle, a laugh, a sigh of frustration; the sound of a sore throat, a nasally voice affected by a cold, the chewing of walnut cakes, a cough, and a clearing of the throat, the turning of the page and the creasing of a book. As one collaborator, Chernoff puts it, “It was the pome [sic] of the body and the body of the pome [sic] coming into existence betwixt, but also by virtue of, the squishy urgency of coffee-slurps and cakey walnut bites; a mouthy awareness of obnoxious proportions.” I remember Chernoff being hungry when we recorded for him, and my friend, who had offered his place in Toronto, happened to have walnut cakes (purchased just down the street on Bloor in Koreatown). We offered him a bowl of walnut cakes and some coffee and a glass of water. It is a small and humorous detail, but it draws attention to the way that the body’s state—whether it be in a state of hunger, or a cold, or exhaustion—creates a “mouthy awareness.” That is, their oral reading creates an awareness of their body because of the demands on the body that oral reading elicits.

Although Chernoff notes that the process felt “curiously mechanical,” alluding to past computer-generated experimentations with Stein’s work to highlight her supposed cold and mechanical writing,<sup>21</sup> the giggles, the laughs, sighs of frustrations, the slurps, the coughs, and the sniffing all remind listeners of a body “on the air.” But the giggles, laughs, and sighs of frustration are more uniquely tied to the text itself. That is, these affective states emerge from the reading of the text itself rather than, as discussed in the last paragraph, the body that manifests in the oral reading of a text. Betty, a collaborator, notes,

Reading Stein in this context was like unravelling thousands of overlapping riddles, with a few Hallmark card sentiments strewn about. I was delighted each time I discovered short, pithy sentences written with predictable grammar. Often, they felt like little gems in an otherwise muddy mess of a thing. Often they contained brief, stark statements of epic depth, to do with love or the meaning of life.

This sense of delight is found across some, but not all, collaborators’ readings, whether it is a giggle in response to the flat delivery of Stein’s humour (yes, she has one, I believe) or the soft “huh” which I assume is read with a slight smile. And then there are those silences, a stillness, that come when collaborators fall upon one of those “brief, stark statements of epic depth.” There is frustration, too, which is accentuated by the body: a “whaaa?!” an “aaargh!,” a loud long sigh, all of which you can imagine the body contorting itself in frustration or readjusting itself after struggling with a certain passage or deflating into the chair. To take Stein’s argument on hearing individuals’ identities further, it is not only how the collaborators’ thoughts and

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<sup>21</sup>. Listen to “Almost Completely Understanding,” a *Poetry Foundation* podcast on Gertrude Stein by Kenneth Goldsmith:  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/audio/detail/75781>

words move but also how the text moves the thoughts and words and bodies of the collaborators that reveal “all that that there was inside them.”

A minor but significant note is that the text is also embodied, drawing attention to the fact that the collaborators are reading from a text. Although Kate’s comment that the book literally fell out of her hands is the most blatant example, there are subtle auralities in each of the recordings. Every now and then, you will hear someone crease the page of the soft cover edition, or the sound of fingertips rubbing against the page, or the thud of the hardcover or the floppier sounding soft cover fumbling in the hands of the collaborators. These sounds significantly acknowledge the presence of the text and the ways in which the text is moved by the collaborators oral readings, as well as how their bodies move and move with the text. The presence of the text also draws attention to the fact that the speakers are reading, and so listeners may pay more attention to how the text is being said rather than what is being said. In other words, the aural presence of the text, I am suggesting, causes listeners to think about the movement of the collaborators’ thoughts and words and bodies and how all of these are intertwined.

In addition to the sound of body and text, the environments in which collaborators are recording are heard and are aurally autobiographical. Because we didn’t have a recording studio, Stephen and I either organized recording sessions at my house or a friends’ house (in Toronto), or in quiet areas in campus locations. However, we informed collaborators that they could read and record themselves wherever they would like. The environment’s encroachment into the collaborators’ recordings becomes a part of their auto/biographical narratives, thus revealing not only “what is inside them” but also what is outside of them. In one recording, the sound of the Charles Street terminal traffic just outside Victoria park is heard in the background because one

collaborator decided to record herself reading there. In another recording, my dog barks in the background as guests, whose chattering voices also come in and out of some recordings, arrive at my house to record; another dog is heard in a collaborator's recording at home. The friendly chatter of families and friends also enter, as well as a spouse and their kid discussing the kid's "need for chips." And of course there are the glasses or bottles or cups placed on a table as collaborators replenish their thirst.

Where the collaborators chose to read or where I had them read is just as important auto/biographically as how they read. Even when I tried to quarter off collaborators into quiet rooms, the sounds of those in relation to the collaborators come in. To put it one way, it is as if their relationalities that form a part of their identity sound aurally in their recording. Not only are collaborators decentering Stein's text but collaborators are decentered by those around them. In the Victoria park recording, the collaborator may have chosen that location because that park, and perhaps the city of Kitchener, was important to them—after all, they had currently lived in Kitchener. The recording sessions I held at my house are indicative of the people I am connected with and the event I held in order to have a multiple recording session. The event reveals a little bit about me (and my dog) although I am not speaking in the recording (but my dog is). But the sound of others is also indicative of the collaborator being a part of that event. And across recordings you can pinpoint who may have read at what time and location, if their space was shared by others. By listening carefully to "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" one can hear that the selves of the project are connected.

The networked selves of "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" reflect the notions of a networked self in *Everybody's Autobiography*. In the book, Stein dwells on the relation of

place to identity, considering the ways in which a place is intrinsically part of a networked self but only in the present moment. She writes,

It is a funny thing about addresses where you live. When you live there you know it so well that it is like identity a thing that is so much a thing that it could not never be any other thing and then you live somewhere else and years later, the address that was so much an address that it was a name like your name and you said it as if it was not an address but something that was living and then years after you do not know what the address was..." (EA 73)

Stein points out that relationality is not restricted to people and animals, but the places one lives as well. Moreover, she argues that where one lives at present is much more a part of one's identity than where one has once lived. Memory, as Stein writes repeatedly throughout *Everybody's Autobiography*, "worries her" because she believes that the memory of one's past lives is actually rooted in one's present self; that is, memories of a past self are unreliable because the present self is framing those memories. Thus, the presentness of the radio installation reinforces this conception of identity in relation to place or environment. The aural environments of the collaborators, whether chosen by the collaborators or arranged by myself and Stephen, inscribe a narrative about the collaborators' selves, as well as my own and Stephen's, at the present time: where they live/are, who they are living/being with, what other kinds of living/being are sounding around them. Even one collaborator, Aaron, noted his surroundings in his response to me, writing, "I started the reading on the midcentury modern table in the back room the back room is full of books Eric's roommates books there's a lot of Middle Eastern history and a lot of Soviet history and a fair amount of fiction I was facing a big window that looked out onto a brick wall...[sic]" Without any prompt to do so, David went on to describe

some stationery and the microphone and the computer and the lamp that lightened his page.<sup>22</sup> In this description and in the aurality of the collaborators' recording, place is "something that [is] living" and is living with the collaborators.

### **Conclusion: Hearing Modern Communities**

In *Everybody's Autobiography*, auto/biographical writing and automediation is a means of democratically contributing to American culture and language; it's a means of affording agency while also vulnerably decentering the self to acknowledge the presence and relationality of others in one's life. Thus, *Everybody's Autobiography* is informed by the American sense of sincerity and reflects on the possibilities of American democracy; the book is not so much concerned with politics in general but rather the politics of language and culture. Although Paul John Eakin argues that all autobiography is relational, Stein makes this more radically explicit and complex. *The Autobiography* was more of an intimate relationality, and *Everybody's Autobiography* was the relationality between the inside (the self) and the outside (others, place, animals). The democratic poetics of a networked self in Stein's book is foregrounded when *Everybody's Autobiography* is orally read and aurally heard, as "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" demonstrates. The inclusivity that Stein felt was at risk in the 1930s is addressed in *Everybody's Autobiography* by making a text that includes the voices of others and reads (and means) differently to those who read from it. This kind of aurality/orality is something that Stein develops throughout her career, emerging with the auralities/oralities that radio was introducing in the 1920s and 1930s. But by the 1930s, radio and Stein had reached a heightened sociality that

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<sup>22</sup>. It is also worth mentioning that Aaron's response is Steinian. A lot of other collaborators either wrote similar to Stein's style (for example, Edith's "reading is reading") or note the temporary influence of Stein on their writing, such as Dani's comment that "[e]ven now I can't tell if this is how I usually write or if I'm making sense."

put into question identity, community, and democracy, while also affording different ways of thinking through these topics. Automedial or auto/biographical acts in *Everybody's Autobiography* is a means of not only maintaining a self (an inside) but also acknowledging and negotiating others (an outside). She makes this clear from the very first sentence of the book: "now everybody will do theirs." This declaration, just like the turning on of the radio (installation), rushes in the voices of everybody and their struggling with and being with each other.

But whether or not there is community in *Everybody's Autobiography* and "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" is a bit ambiguous and begs the question, what constitutes a community? Stein, too, tackles this question in *Everybody's Autobiography*, arriving at a modern conception of community that does not rely on sameness. Without necessarily mentioning "community," Stein writes,

The Making of Americans is a very important thing and everybody ought to be reading at it or it, and now I am trying to do it again to say everything about everything, only then I was wanting to write a history of every individual person who ever is or was or shall be living and I was convinced it could be done as I still am but now individual anything as related to every other individual is to me no longer interesting. At that time I did not realize that the earth is completely covered over with every one. In a way it was not then because every one was in a group and a group was separated from every other one, and so the character of every one was interesting because they were in relation but now since the earth is all covered over with every one there is really no relation between any one and so if this *Everybody's Autobiography* is to be the *Autobiography* of everyone it is



not to be of any connection between any one and any one because now there is none. (EA 101-102)

In this passage, Stein writes about the transition to a heightened sociality, using *The Making of Americans* as a comparative example of pre-heightened sociality, a sociality that was more concerned with sameness and having something in common. Despite *The Making of Americans* and *Everybody's Autobiography* sharing the same attempt in writing everything about everybody, she notes that the major difference is connection: whereas *The Making of Americans* follows a family and those around them, there is no clear groups that Stein belongs to or associates herself with in *Everybody's Autobiography*. Encounters between herself and others in *Everybody's Autobiography* are fragmentary, digressive, and random. The heightened sociality of sonic modernity, for Stein, invites difference and a concept of community that does not require belonging. "No connection" does not mean "disconnected," as in alienated. Rather connection, in *Everybody's Autobiography*, is the result of affective encounters; the text *moves* between people as Stein *moves*; the self is a networked self with those who have nothing in common.

The community or communities that are in *Everybody's Autobiography* is established by the vulnerability and interruption of the self with others that Georges Bataille argues characterizes modern community. The text *is* interruptive, and Stein establishes this at the beginning of the book with the many people she mentions or is reminded of. It is no longer an older concept of community of which one belongs to and identifies with but modernity's belonging itself, as Agamben would argue. There is no connection but there is no disconnection; there is just belonging itself. As Jessica Berman points out, Stein "challenges the dichotomy between community and cosmopolitanism" and credits "(dis)placement and movement" (158) to

the formation of community. Stein's writing in *Everybody's Autobiography* demonstrates that belonging itself can still be "connective" without being deterministic. In this sense, the term everybody in *Everybody's Autobiography* does not mean an all-encompassing mass. The fact that the book is mostly concerned with the reception of Stein's work and the reciprocity of others whom she meets suggests that "everybody" is affectively constituted by the individuals whom Stein encounters. Logan Esdale argues that *Everybody's Autobiography* should be read "as a news-letter addressed to a semi-public audience...She writes *to* them" (Esdale 101). But the term community suggests more of an intimacy and a vulnerability that Stein attempts to (re)create in *Everybody's Autobiography* by incorporating others speaking and removing standard grammar to afford further voices to enter the text. Further, many of the collaborators described the reading of *Everybody's Autobiography* to be very conversational, and therefore feeling dialogic rather than feeling written to (or broadcasted). Thus, the conversational tone and present-ness of Stein's text is much more in line with radio's presentness than a news-letter's.

But in terms of how the radio installation is constitutive of an affective community around listening to and reading Stein, I can only say that the installation's community is not representative of a kind of community Stein experienced in the 1930s. Rather, "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" contains a community which my collaborators, participants, and I are a part of with Stein. Karin Cope helps me illustrate this point. She writes, "*Reading Stein comes to be then being with Stein, being alongside Stein, living with her—and if one is not Alice Toklas then that reading requires certain careful acts of reconstruction and imagination which seek to see, know, and experience the being-with-Stein which Stein demands*" (Cope 18-19; original emphasis). None of the collaborators are Alice Toklas. The radio installation as a critical media project, for myself and collaborators, is a means of reconstructing and imagining the affect

of being-with-Stein, as well as the affective response of Stein to radio and the affective public or community that was felt by Stein. This, as Cope suggests, is all we can do. The community in the radio installation is representative of the relationships, the networks, in which I am in. Thus, as much as “Everybody’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*” is by Philip Miletic and Stephen Trothen, the installation itself—just as Stein’s text does—decenters the authorial presence as soon as click of the radio turns on and the sound of everybody rushes in.

Chapter 4: Wallace, the Internet, and the Late Postmodernist Page/Screen: Democratizing  
Textuality

**Introduction: The Mutual Emergence of Late Postmodernism and the Internet**

The previous two chapters have situated Stein within the Modernist soundscape and defined her democratic poetics as mutually emergent with the American imagination of radio. In this chapter, I position David Foster Wallace's textual (rather than oral/aural) aesthetics of sincerity as mutually emerging with the protocols of the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Wallace employs techniques that vary throughout his career but all of them invite the reader to participate in the work by textually rendering (the *feeling* of) dialogism, relationality, and intimacy in the text. Just as Stein's work encourages participation by "coaxing" the reader into orally performing the self through speech, Wallace encourages participation by coaxing the reader into textually performing the self through writing. This chapter argues that Wallace develops—not without its false starts and readjustments—an articulation of a politics coupled with affect that partakes in an *emerging* culture and rhetoric of the affective power of the written word and its role in facilitating community and democratic participation. I do not claim that Wallace is influenced by the Internet or vice versa; I situate Wallace's concerns of community and communication as mutually emerging with the anxieties and promises of virtual communities expressed in the late 1980s and 1990s. I draw attention to the similarities between Wallace and cyberenthusiast Howard Rheingold in their writing on community and democracy. Rheingold's early books on virtual reality and virtual communities received widespread attention and were influential in shaping the American public's and scholars' thinking and writing about the Internet. Rheingold, a major figure in the cyberenthusiast community that largely emerged from California, shares

similar rhetoric with Wallace when discussing community and communication, although the two never crossed paths. The emergent rhetoric around concerns of community, communication, and democracy of the 1980s and 1990s signals a “sea change” (McLaughlin) or “mood swing” (Hayles and Gonnon 100) in American postmodernist culture and literature.

Although Wallace was by no means a “cyberenthusiast,” scholars, critics, and readers have made numerous comparisons between Wallace’s writing aesthetic and the aesthetic of the Internet. Maud Newton claims that “in the Internet era, Wallace’s moves have been adopted” (n.p.). Alexander Chee agrees in response, calling any kind of Wallace-like imitation the “house style of the internet,” specifically blog writing (n.p.). Richard Warnica points out that there is even an aversion towards introducing Wallace’s writing to students *because* it is blog-like (n.p.). But Kathleen Fitzpatrick argues that the internet’s “many-to-many networks...can produce precisely the kinds of human relationship, the kinds of conversation, that Wallace’s vision of the novel meant to foster” (198). And, in the 20th anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest*, Tom Bissell calls *Infinite Jest* “the first great Internet novel...Both [the novel and the internet] are too big. Both contain too much. Both welcome you in. Both push you away.” (xii). These comparisons are underdeveloped but they continue to be made, repeatedly putting the aesthetics of Wallace and of the Internet together. These critics conflate Wallace’s critique of postmodern America’s isolating “world-weariness or hip ennui” with the early optimism of the internet’s ability to bring people together (*IJ* 694); they figure Wallace’s attention to “stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, stuff that is was real” as the stuff of the internet’s contents (*IJ* 592). This chapter expands and elaborates on these comments by critically comparing the early rhetoric of cyberenthusiasts and the early ethnographic studies of internet users with Wallace’s writing. My analysis illuminates their shared democratic hope in written language, privileging

dialogical writing and the embodied connection between text and the real world. But I also illuminate the messy contradictions, ambivalence, and the trappings of neoliberalist thought in their formulations of democracy that too often excluded others.

By “neoliberalism” I mean an ideology that privileges the self-interests of individuals and conceives of citizenship as formed through consumption, having roots in liberal-individualism and (techno)libertarianism. Further, in the context of the 1990s techno-culture (but also today), neoliberalism privileges and assumes white bodies and experiences as universal. As Henry Giroux understands the term, neoliberalism is

an ideology marked by the selling off of public goods to private interests; the attack on social provisions; the rise of the corporate state organized around privatization, free trade, and deregulation; the celebration of self interests over social needs; the celebration of profit-making as the essence of democracy coupled with the utterly reductionist notion that consumption is the only applicable form of citizenship. But even more than that, it upholds the notion that the market serves as a model for structuring all social relations: not just the economy, but the governing of all of social life.” (n.p.)

Giroux argues further that neoliberalism “tends to produce identities, subjects and ways of life...grounded in the notion of the *free, possessive individual* and committed to the right of individual and ruling groups to accrue wealth removed from matters of ethics and social cost.” (my emphasis). N. Katherine Hayles points out that this possessive individualism of neoliberal thought within the internet techno-culture of the 1990s employs a rhetoric of disembodiment that claims a “notorious universality” that erases “markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and ethnicity” (4-5). Michael Omi and Howard Winant elucidate this rhetoric of disembodiment,

claiming that “neoliberalism in the United States was very much a racial regime,” and its “central racial component was colorblind racial ideology” (211). They argue that the “colorblind racial project fit in nicely with neoliberalism’s emphasis on market relationships and privatization” (212). Throughout this chapter, I critically examine the struggles of cyberenthusiasts and Wallace to articulate and formulate a participatory democracy that undermines neoliberalism but instead, in some cases, contributes to that ideology. As Omi and Winant point out, it was “the rise of radical, democratic, participatory culture, that neoliberalism had to overcome” (211). The democratic, participatory culture of Wallace’s work and of cyberenthusiasts’ imaginary of the internet posed that threat to neoliberalism, but also succumbed or fell prey to neoliberalism.

On certain points, Wallace is more sophisticated, self-critical, and considerate than the cyberenthusiasts. Wallace, more than the cyberenthusiasts, was increasingly self-aware in his critiques of his own self-interests and the self-interests of others, working towards a dialogic appeal within his writing. The cyberenthusiasts, on the other hand, employed a rhetoric of possessive individualism and techno-libertarianism that conflated individual agency with market participation. But this chapter does not shy away from and seeks to address the white male bias in Wallace’s work and point to how this bias resonates with the cyberenthusiast movement. So, in addition to my analysis of the shared aesthetics of dialogical writing and the text’s connection to the real world in Late Postmodernism, I also argue that the writing of Wallace and the writing of early cyberenthusiasts do not successfully implement their democratic arguments into their work and actions; or rather, that the implementation of democracy glaringly excludes others. Like the democratic hope of radio, this hope privileges whiteness, assumes white subjectivity as universal, and tends to slip into utopian rhetoric of regaining a “lost” sense of community rather

than recognizing the kinds of communities (often marginalized groups) that already exist.<sup>23</sup>

While Wallace and Rheingold have good intentions and strive for democratic inclusion in their writing, they do not acknowledge the kinds of exclusion in their work. When Bissell argues that Wallace's *Infinite Jest* is the "first great" Internet novel, he further contributes to the privileging of white maleness in relation to the Internet, and unintentionally draws attention to this bias found both in Wallace's work and in cyberenthusiasts' rhetoric and writings. To paint a broader picture of the social, cultural, and political underpinnings of the mutually emergent relationship between literature and the internet I include some of Wallace's contemporaries. However, unlike Chapter 2's transnational approach with radio and literature, this chapter's focus is on American internet and literature since the majority of early cyberenthusiasts were American.

The trajectory of this chapter first defines what I call "Late Postmodernism." This section, labelled "Late to the Postmodernity," situates literary, technological, and cultural imbrications that highlight the "sea change" and/or "mood swing" in the 1990s that critics and authors are pinpointing. I, then, establish the Late Postmodern imagination of sincerity, intersubjectivity, and writing as relational being. This section, "Writing Intersubjectivity, Intersubjective Writing" establishes the mutual emergence of the dialogical appeal in Wallace's writing and on the internet, which blurs the lines between author/ity and reader/consumer and fosters "participatory culture" (Jenkins). Then, in "Outside Words," I continue the discussion of sincerity but focus on the ways in which Late Postmodernity draws attention to its mediation of the real world and the embodiment of reading/writing, emphasizing writing's *connection to* (rather than its *representation of*) the real world. In "Such Democratic Hope...Much Democratic

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<sup>23</sup>. Recall Nancy's and Blanchot's warnings against rhetoric that laments a lost sense of community written about in Chapter 1. This rhetoric of "community lost" is typically employed by people who seek to form communities of sameness, which, by Nancy's/Blanchot's/Agamben's/Esposito's definition, is *not community*.



Failure,” I compare the rhetoric of community and democracy in Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* and in Wallace’s “Authority and American Usage,” both of which identify democratic potential in the written language. I demonstrate that Wallace is aware of and critiques the neoliberalism of cyberenthusiasts, but I also reflect on the ways in which Wallace struggled and failed to implement his own democratic goals. Altogether, this chapter reveals the tensions and relationship between the literary and technological imaginations of Late Postmodernity and situates Wallace within these tensions and the aesthetics they produce.

### **Late to the Postmodernity: Postmodernity in the 1990s**

In the 1980s, the main points of access to the internet were Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), USEnet newsgroups, Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), and Internet Relay Chat (IRC).<sup>24</sup> These Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) systems were primarily text-based, used for chatting in real time (IRC/MUDs), holding discussions on forums (BBS/USEnet), and sending and receiving files (BBS/USEnet). MUDs are role-playing games, inspired by the tabletop game Dungeons and Dragons, and are also text-based. By the early 1990s, the internet was met with an increasing amount of enthusiasm, hype, and attention by the public, government, authors, and academics. Sherry Turkle, for instance, claimed that CMC, but MUDs in particular, created a new kind of literature (*Life on the Screen* 11). The growing attention to the internet was the result of the recent adoption of a graphical user interface (GUI) instead of Command Line and greater access to the internet, which was jumpstarted by the invention of the World Wide Web in 1989 and the purchasable web browser Mosaic in 1992 with Netscape (purchasable) and Windows Internet Explorer (free) to follow (Campbell-Kelly 302-314). The launch of *Wired* magazine and

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<sup>24</sup>. See Turkle’s *The Second Self*, Kendall’s *Hanging out in the Virtual Pub*, and Cherney’s *Conversation and Community* for MUDs and IRC, Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, for BBSs, and Jenkins’ “Do You Enjoy Making Me Feel Stupid,” Bury’s *Cyberspaces of their Own*, and Nancy K Baym’s *Tune in, Log on* for Usenet groups and listservs.

the publication of Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* in 1993 further pushed the internet into the public's attention. And the arrival of Windows 95 in 1995, which integrated Internet Explorer, and the success of Apple's iMac in 1998 (and Steve Jobs' return to Apple) increasingly made the personal computer with internet access a cost-effective household item. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 introduced government intervention in "cyberspace," which prompted cyberenthusiast John Perry Barlow to write his infamous "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" that argued for a government-less internet and the revolutionary powers of the internet. Because of all the attention and enthusiasm the internet received, the 90s period of the internet is referred to as the dot com boom era, which crashed in 2001 because of poor business models.<sup>25</sup> The dot com boom era is marked by techno-deterministic enthusiasm and optimism (Rheingold and Barlow) but also techno-deterministic skepticism (Postman) towards the internet and the way it was shaping the way we live. While not entirely equivalent to the radio boom in the 1920s, the dot com boom shares with the radio boom contesting imaginations between two-way, dialogical communication and a one-way, top-down model of broadcasting or dissemination.

For critics who have argued for the "end" of Postmodernism, the internet is viewed as playing a significant role in this shift, with some critics leaning towards deterministic and utopian claims. Hutcheon refers to a "Net aesthetic" when she articulates the end of postmodernism (181). And Huber notes that "[f]ew scholars engaging with the question of twenty-first-century literature fail to point to the new realities technology has created in the course of the last 20 years to support their intuition that after the global conquest by the internet we cannot possibly still be the same postmoderns (or postmodernists) as before" (Huber 41). For

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<sup>25</sup>. See Abramson's *Digital Phoenix* and Lowenstein's *Origins of the Crash*.

Huber, the internet is not just a technological event but a cultural one that re-frames and re-contextualizes postmodernism. We cannot be the same postmodernists as we were before, she suggests, but still postmodernists nevertheless. Thus, I prefer to call Wallace's writing, along with contemporary literature and culture, "Late Postmodernism" as opposed to the muddy term "post-postmodernism" or its discordant labels.<sup>26</sup> The "Late" in Late Postmodernism functions similarly to how Romantic scholars categorize Early and Late Romanticism: the "late" signals a technological and cultural shift but not a departure from the early postmodernism of the 1960s-80s. Late Postmodernism puts the literary aesthetics of the early generation to a different political and literary use than do early postmodernism's skepticism, cynicism, and deconstruction. As Irmtraud Huber argues, "the move is not so much *against* postmodernism but *through* and *beyond* it" (46). I argue that Late Postmodernism moves beyond postmodernism's "waning of affect" (Jameson 11) and detachment towards a *wanting* of affect and of "optimistic attachments" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 1).

This "wanting of affect" often appears in Wallace's work as "being human," which further means resisting solipsistic isolation by being and feeling connected to and involved with others. In an oft-cited interview with Larry McCaffrey, Wallace says, "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (26; original emphasis) and does so by giving the reader "imaginative access to other selves" and thereby instilling feelings of community with others<sup>27</sup> (22). In Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, characters struggle with "being human," as most characters have

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<sup>26</sup>. "Renewalism" (Toth), "New Sincerity" (Kelly), "Reconstruction" (Huber), "Metamodernism" (Vermeulen and van den Akker), "neorealism" (Rebein), and "digimodernism" (Kirby).

<sup>27</sup>. I like that Wallace suggests that literature recognizes the "reality that tends to be 49 percent pleasure and 51 percent pain" (McCaffrey 22). For me, it echoes community theory's arguments that community is not sameness; the phrase points to discomforting the reader by exposing them to others' lives rather than blissfully ignoring them.

an aversion to “gooey sentiment” and communication with others (694). Berlant characterizes the literary aesthetics of this shift from Early to Late Postmodernism as containing “languages of anxiety, contingency, and precarity” because of the “structure of relationality” optimistic attachments manifest (*Cruel Optimism* 19; 13). The structure of relationality in Late Postmodernism evokes the aims of establishing a dialogical appeal that engages with the reader, but this aim is troubled by anxiety, contingency, and precarity. Wallace’s work, in particular, is defined by these languages: the double-bind his characters often struggle with, his sentences, both paragraph-length and concise, that capture the affects of anxiety and depression, and his ambivalence marked by precarity.<sup>28</sup> But also, Wallace’s work throughout his career addresses the reader, emphasizing a relationship between author and reader, between the text and the real world. Late Postmodernism’s structure of relationality and its accompanying “languages” depart from early postmodernism’s languages of playfulness with textual histories, pastiche/parody, and its own textuality.

Late Postmodernism’s “wanting of affect” and dialogical appeal reintroduces sincerity but with the backdrop of late capitalism and new media, specifically the internet. Although Adam Kelly does not acknowledge Zukofsky’s essay on sincerity (a large oversight), he argues that what defines Late Postmodernism is a “new” sincerity. Drawing from Lionel Trilling, Kelly argues that “sincerity places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others” (132). What puts the “new” in New Sincerity is precisely “the formidable role of new media” (135) and “communicative uncertainty” it evokes (136); however, he is not clear what the phrase

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<sup>28</sup>. This ambivalence is most apparent when Wallace discusses religion, his struggle with wanting to believe in some higher power. As he writes in *This Is Water*, “Because here’s something else that’s weird but true: in the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship” (CITE). But what Wallace worshipped was never really clear.

“new media” refers to. He only mentions advertising, noting that “it becomes impossible to separate in an absolute manner those communications genuinely directed toward the benefit of the receiver from those that serve primarily to draw attention to the sender” (137). But I believe that Kelly’s claims can be extended to the arrival of mass communication that radio partly introduced. As John Durham Peters argues, sincerity was and still is a feature of a good radio broadcaster, who is able to create feelings of community amongst listeners (142). For others, like Adorno, however, sincerity is perceived as manipulative. This contentious role of sincerity as, on the one hand, community-building and manipulative and, on the other hand, introducing communicative uncertainty also appears in CMC in the same capacity it did with radio. For instance, Peter Steiner’s famous *New Yorker* cartoon, which features a dog sitting at a computer with another dog with the caption: “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog,” captures the anxieties of online anonymity. Steiner’s cartoon captures the popular assumptions that anyone and anything can be anyone and anything online, thereby assuming that online space is completely disconnected from physical space. While Steiner’s cartoon is playful, this anxiety manifested into a fear and distrust of others online, prompting, in part, the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The work of Wallace and his Late Postmodernist contemporaries employ sincerity to rehabilitate the “(impossible) possibility of communication” (Huber 48), emphasizing intersubjectivity and literature’s connection to the real world.

This emphasis on intersubjectivity and connection to the real world is what marks the point of departure from Early Postmodernism to Late Postmodernism. To elaborate on Kelly’s definition of (new) sincerity, recall in Chapter 2 when I argued that sincerity is the dialogical relationship which acknowledges the reciprocity between reader, text/medium, and author and includes an intimacy of the here-and-now; it acknowledges that writing is a mediation of and

interaction with the world and readers. Although I risk generalization, I find Early Postmodern works to be concerned with textuality and pluralizing history, experiences, meanings, and representations. Postmodernism intentionally breaks down the Modernist “grand narrative” in order to afford plurality (Lyotard). Indeed, Stein also breaks down the Modernist grand narrative, but does so unintentionally through failure. Modernist grand narratives and their “conventions and presuppositions” are broken down by being included in the postmodernist text only to be subverted. (Hutcheon 1-2). The grand narratives that postmodern challenge and subvert range from the dominance of western literary traditions and conventional storytelling (John Barth, Ishmael Reed, Sherley Anne Williams), dominant history/ies that exclude others and/or suppress lives, facts, and experiences (Thomas Pynchon, Octavia Butler), “serious” high art that excludes popular culture (John Ashbery, Donald Barthelme), and the stability of meaning and experience (the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, such as Lyn Hejinian and Charles Bernstein). But whereas these postmodern practices were once emerging and politically challenging, they soon became a dominant mode of expression in American culture that many younger writers of Wallace’s generation, and other writers from the earlier generation, felt were alienating.<sup>29</sup> Wallace argues that TV by the 1980s included self-subversion and -reflexivity in order to situate its—that is, TV shows’ and TV ads’—power. He writes, “It is now *television* that takes elements of the *postmodern*—the involution, the absurdity, the sardonic fatigue, the iconoclasm and rebellion—and bends them to the ends of spectation and consumption” (“E Unibus Pluram” 64; original emphasis). While Wallace is addressing American television, his argument can even be extended to American politics today in which postmodern absurdity, instability of meaning, and

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<sup>29</sup>. Postmodernity’s dominance in American culture, in Wallace’s opinion, produces empty literature by writers who just want to be “hip.” Wallace targets Mark Leyner’s *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* in his essay, and he has also mentioned in an interview with Larry McCaffrey his distaste for Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*.

subversion of historical narratives are a means of political power and affords “truthiness” and the “post-truth” political landscape of the Bush and Trump administrations. Late Postmodernists, then, seek to bend the elements of postmodernism further, almost to breaking point, to the ends of intersubjectivity, sincerity, and a dialogical relationship between literature and the real world (rather than between other textualities or images).

Thus, Late Postmodernism occurs when postmodernity becomes dominant; it works through the alienating “fragmentation” of late capitalism’s dominant postmodernism and towards (re)connection and community (Jameson 11). Sincerity and “cruel optimism”—a relation that “exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 1)—become emerging affective components of writing to enable intersubjective connection, emphasizing the relationality of people and their words and the difficulties or impossibilities and vulnerabilities of (making) intersubjective connections. As Zadie Smith writes in her introduction to *The Burned Children of America*, writers in the 90s and 2000s are “attempting to make something happen off the page, outside words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do” (xx). By making things happen off of the page, Late Postmodernism emphasizes and draws attention to the relationality and reciprocity between literature and life, between writers and readers, between fictional worlds and real worlds. In the conclusion of Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram,” he gestures to this new shift in postmodernism, arguing that “some weird bunch of anti-rebels” will “risk...accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness...[And] back away from ironic *watching*” (81). And by doing so, they will address the “untrendy human troubles and *emotions* in U.S. life with *reverence and conviction*” (my emphasis). The result is an individual who moves away from spectatorship (alienation) and *involves* themselves and feels the troubles and emotions of American life with

great respect and a firm belief in this respect. Wallace describes an affect of vulnerability and its risk that is required to maintain intersubjectivity and plurality, preventing the solipsism that the ironic culture of dominant postmodernism encourages. Late Postmodernism is characterized by the tension of the push and pull between alienation and relational being, between disembodiment and a conception of “human life [as] embedded in a material world of great complexity” (Hayles 5). The literature of Late Postmodernism seeks to stress that being, itself, is defined as relational and “*as community*” in order to have others acknowledge and engage the pluralities that postmodernity affords rather than ignore or disregard these pluralities (Nancy 6).<sup>30</sup>

Early rhetoric of and studies on the writing of CMC point out similar aesthetics of sincerity and dialogical appeal that afford participation and involvement and the *feeling* of community. Online CMC offered an opportunity (that radio once offered) to move away from one-to-many broadcasting that does not involve (or provide involvement for) the American citizen. Even literature, in the way Wallace and other Late Postmodernists are reconceiving it, attempts to depart from the one-to-many model, *if not actually then virtually through feeling*. For Late Postmodernist writers and internet users of the late 1980s and 1990s, the written word emerged as vitally important for instilling democratic *feeling* and affording intersubjective connection. I am not suggesting, however, that cyberenthusiasts and Wallace (or other Late Postmodernist writers) shared the same views or developed in the same way; rather, I am pinpointing a mutual emergence of cultural, technological, and literary aesthetics of sincerity that prioritize community as being. I approach these studies of the internet and the writings of

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<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that the 1980s saw the emergence of “community theory.” Anderson, Nancy, and Blanchot all wrote their major works on “community” in the 1980s. Agamben and Lingis followed shortly in the 1990s, and Esposito published *Communitas* in 2010. Besides Anderson, all of these theorists refer or allude to Georges Bataille's 1930s writings on community, which argued against the definition of community as “sameness” that fascism and Nazism presented. For these theorists, it was urgent to re-introduce and extend Bataille's warnings and argument in the 1980s and onwards.



internet users as historical and cultural documents that capture the mutual emergence of these democratic feelings. As Gitelman argues, when media are new, their uses and imaginations are not stable: “[m]edia...are very particular sites for very particular, importantly social as well as historically and culturally specific experiences of meaning” (8).

### **Writing Intersubjectivity, Intersubjective Writing**

Consider the infamous 1984 Macintosh computer commercial. In this Orwell-inspired commercial, directed by Ridley Scott, a mass of people wearing what looks like gas masks and colourless rags march towards and sit in front of a large television screen projecting a Big Brother-esque head. As this is occurring, the commercial cuts now and then to a woman, wearing vibrant red shorts and a white tank top with a computer and an apple drawn on it, running with a sledge hammer. In the final scene, the woman reaches the television and throws the sledge hammer into the screen as the big talking head says, “we will prevail.” The screen explodes into a blinding white light, the masses seem shocked (and perhaps liberated, no longer wearing gas masks), and the ad introduces the Macintosh (only by name) as providing a 1984 that “won’t be like ‘1984.’” Indeed, this is a commercial for the *personal computer* and promotes a neoliberal individualism; yet it also communicates the hope and promise of many-to-many networks that would free individuals from the control of Big Brother-esque one-to-many broadcasting and establish a dialogical relationship between others. As Henry Jenkins and David Thornburn optimistically argue, “[n]etworked computing operates according to principles fundamentally different from those of broadcast media: access, participation, reciprocity, and many-to-many rather than one-to-many communication” (Jenkins and Thornburn 2). Much as early American radio had the American Radio Relay League that advocated for a “Citizen Wireless” and minimal governmental intervention, the Internet—despite its precursor, ARPAnet, being a

government, military invention—attracted cyberenthusiasts to advocate for government-less Internet because of its “many-to-many” communication model that fostered a participatory culture of “media producers and consumers...as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (Jenkins 3). One of these advocacy groups was the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), founded in 1990 by John Perry Barlow, Mitch Kapor, and John Gilmore for the purpose of “defending civil liberties in the digital world” (“About EFF” n.p.). The EFF’s rhetoric, like Apple’s ad, tended towards a neoliberal market logic (see Morrison, “An Impossible Future”). Yet, the EFF was indicative of the kinds of hopes and utopian desire that grabbed hold of the American popular imagination of the internet because of its protocols of reciprocity and participation, protocols that needed to be “defended” against government intervention.

The hope and promise of reciprocity and participation, however, is not only technological; it is literary as well. In both the imaginations of online CMC and of Late Postmodernist writers, the screen and page of one-to-many formats are or must be broken in order to facilitate reciprocity between others. In literature, writers were aiming to write in intersubjectivity in which the readers *feel* as if they are in dialogue with the author and participating in the fiction. In the popular CMC imaginary, CMC forms like Internet Relay Chat (IRC) chatrooms and Multi-User-Dungeons in particular presented written communication as immediate, participatory, and situated in the present; or, if asynchronous, like email and listservs, online written communication is still conceived as having greater immediacy compared to previous forms of written communication. Both CMC and literature begin to have a dialogical appeal, with literature *writing intersubjectivity* and with CMC being characterized by cyberenthusiasts and academics as *intersubjective writing*.

At its inception, CMC had been heralded as an immediate form of intersubjective writing, affording individuals the ability to engage in real-time written conversation. Moreover, despite CMC being a mode of *written* communication, it is typically described as a blend between an *oral* and a written medium, which characterization places it closely to (the imaginations of) radio. Brenda Danet argues that “[a]lthough text-based online communication is written, it shares many qualities with oral communication. In interactive—synchronous—modes, it is dynamic, improvisational” (11). In 1991, Kathleen Ferrara et al proposed to call CMC “Interactive Written Discourse.” And Lynn Cherny calls her approach to studying online culture an “ethnography of speaking” to conceptualize the “shared rules of speaking and interpretations of speech performance” (23). These characterizations of CMC as an oral *and* written medium are not limited to academics. Howard Rheingold describes Internet Relay Chat as “a medium that combines the features of conversation and writing” (2). And Kate Crawford points out that since the 1990s, “there has been a glorification of ‘voice’ as the prime form of participation online...[and ‘voice’] has been charged with all the political currents of democratic practice” (80-1). Aurality, as Crawford points out, is not typically associated with online activity. But she privileges “listening” over “lurking” to describe some forms of agency, attention, and subjectivity online. The popular and academic conceptualization of CMC as a written mode of expressing one’s *voice* and *listening* to others (re)introduces a similar imaginary that radio had at its inception. Like the American radio imaginary, the American CMC imaginary adopts a dialogical aesthetic informed by sincerity and defines the individual as fundamentally relational, in the sense that the individual has an unique (written) voice, but this voice is only recognized

when “heard” (read) and responded to by others.<sup>31</sup> Thus, just as early American radio and Modernist writing establishes a democratic “wireless imagination,” early American CMC and Late Postmodernist writing establishes a democratic “CMC imagination” that also carries forward the contradictions and flaws of the wireless imagination.

CMC and radio share the imaginary of the dialogical appeal. Just as Bertolt Brecht believed that radio’s two-way capabilities made users “pupils” *and* “teachers,” many cyberenthusiasts believed that CMC had the same potential to shift civic culture towards a more “citizen-based democracy” (Rheingold 14). As Rheingold claims, “the political significance of CMC lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy’s monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus *revitalize* citizen-based democracy” (14; my emphasis). Both Brecht and Rheingold are responding to the fear of *broadcasting*, or one-to-many communication: whereas Brecht (and other Modernist writers/advocates for two-way radio communication) is specifically responding to the looming threat of broadcasting and its ties to fascism, Rheingold (influenced by the EFF) is responding to the dominance of broadcasting and its ties to late capitalism. Radio, for Brecht, emphasized and encouraged greater dialogical relationships between others; CMC and the internet, for Rheingold, *restored* this promise of radio’s dialogical relationship between others. As Danet argues, “the medium [the internet] *restores* the presence of one’s interlocutor, long absent in the production of extensive texts” (12; my emphasis). The desire for an interlocutor’s presence is, in part, a Late Postmodernist desire in response to the increasing commercialization and consumption of “images” or “simulacra.” As Rheingold suggests, echoing Brecht, CMC creates a cultural reconfiguration of (cultural)

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<sup>31</sup>. A further similarity to consider, however, is how both radio and the internet often privilege the male voice, or associate “voice” with masculinity.

authority by challenging a hierarchy and introducing the interlocutor's presence; it creates a cultural imaginary of reciprocal engagement and acknowledgement rather than spectation.

Although early “web 1.0” internet is seen as separate from “web 2.0” internet’s social media, early internet forms of communication were social.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, this sociability was viewed as being dependent on sincerity, and that this sincerity was afforded by CMC itself. In an early study of Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Elizabeth M. Reid notes that “[t]he expectation of personal integrity and *sincerity* is both upheld by convention and enforced by structure” (402; my emphasis). IRC is an online application that affords themed chat rooms or “channels” for users to enter and chat with others using text only, whether in groups or privately. Although Reid labels IRC as a kind of early postmodern literature in its users’ playfulness with language, it is *sincerity* and personal integrity that is enforced and central. I realize that Reid’s focus is on IRC only and not on CMC in general; however, many of the key features of IRC—social interaction, recognition of language playfulness (acronyms, emoticons), and “shared modes of understanding” (402)—are features of online interaction on the forums of Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), the interactions on the text-based multiplayer Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), USEnet newsgroups, and mailing listservs. Turkle, whose recent pessimistic writings on technology contradict her enthusiasm and optimism of her 1980s and ‘90s work, describes MUDs in the 1990s as responsible for producing a new kind of literature, a “*collaboratively*

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<sup>32</sup>. The division between web 1.0 and web 2.0 is marked by the 2001 dot-com crash, wherein certain models, infrastructures, business practices, and engagement fundamentally changed. Tim O’Reilly, who coined the term “Web 2.0,” defines 1.0 as a “publishing” medium (content is published) and 2.0 as a “participation” medium (content is produced through and maintained by user participation). danah boyd and Nicole Ellison provide another useful distinction between the two. Web 1.0 media, such as BBSs, MUDs, and IRC were “topic-centred,” organized around topics of interest via “channels” or “categories” or servers; social media, an instantiation of “web 2.0,” such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, are “user-centred,” wherein users must create a profile to produce content and engage with others.

written literature” (11; my emphasis). And Rheingold argues that CMC is “a form of conversation as well as a form of publication,” emphasizing the public-ness, in its exposure and the intimacy of the medium, and the dialogical relationships this publicness and sincerity affords (51). This dialogical appeal, for Rheingold, Turkle, and Reid, blur the lines between audience and writer: “Like others who fell into the WELL [Whole Earth eLectronic Link BBS], I soon discovered that I was audience, performer, and scriptwriter, along with my companions” (Rheingold xv-xvi). As a result, these “early social media” all relied on and emphasized a social, dialogical space that was “less dependent on official voices of expertise and authority” (Jenkins and Thornburn 2). Instead, the CMC imaginary emphasized relationality, dialogue, reciprocity. Reid, Turkle, and Rheingold argue that the early internet had, as Timmer conceives Late Postmodernist writing, a “structure of we.” This structure brought about a “demystification process going on between the artist and the audience,” between writers and readers, and redefined writing as an act of communication between one human and another (Bowie “David Bowie Speaks to...”). This “demystification process” was not something attributed solely to internet communication; it was a cultural process occurring across music, literature, film, etc.

Wallace’s earlier fiction goes through a similar “demystification process,” in which Wallace attempt to establish a dialogical appeal to counter the increasing commercialization of literature in a late capitalist environment. Wallace’s novel, *The Broom of the System*, and his short story collection, *Girl With Curious Hair*, are typically described as early postmodernist because of the way they imitate early postmodern authors. *Broom* is “Pynchonesque” and *Girl With Curious Hair* resembles the work of the “brat pack” authors, Ellis, McInerney, and Janowitz. But in *Broom* and *Girl*, there are moments when Wallace expresses a desire to figure out how to bring the dialogical appeal to literature. The first overt expression of this desire is in

“Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” the concluding short story in *Girl*. In “Westward...”, Wallace critiques the metafictional aesthetics of early postmodernism as ignorant and disrespectful of the reader. He implies that early postmodern aesthetics are solipsistic or one-to-(an unacknowledged)many, beginning the story with an epigraph from Anthony Burgess: “As we are all solipsists, and all die, the world dies with us” (232). The story follows a group of MFA students who are heading towards “the scheduled Reunion of everyone who has ever been in a McDonald’s commercial, arranged by J.D. Steelritter Advertising and featuring a party to end all parties, a spectacular collective Reunion commercial, the ribbon-cutting revelation of the new Funhouse franchise’s flagship discotheque...” (“Westward...” 235). The metafictional aesthetic of early postmodernism in the story is now *commercialized* and arranged by an ad agency, with the McDonald’s commercial being a kind of meta-commercial of all McDonald’s commercials. The explicit intertext is John Barth’s metafictional “Lost in the Funhouse.” But Barth’s Funhouse, once symbolic of the playfulness and self-referentiality of literature itself is now a commercial *franchise* in “Westward...”

The commercialization and commodification of early postmodern techniques of self-referentiality leave these techniques empty, narcissistic, and solipsistic. Wallace’s argument is that Barth’s Funhouse, now a franchise rather than an exemplar of literary subversion, produces MFA students who write with no regard to or acknowledgement of the reader. Instead their writing is self-gratifying and pretentious: they write “Nouns verbed by, adverbially adjectival” (“Westward...” 234) or a “twenty-page poem that’s *all* punctuation” (251; original emphasis). The metafictional writing of early postmodernism in “Westward...” is critiqued as a conservative means of capitalist endorsement but also “wouldn’t be much fun for anybody to actually read” (251). Instead, these writers are all narcissists, unable to look away from the image of their own

writing. This franchising of early postmodernism in “Westward...” points towards what Jameson calls early postmodernism’s “depthlessness,” “which finds its prolongation....in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum” (6). Wallace finds that the depthlessness of early postmodern writing only reinforces the “deconstruction” of communication, as represented by a poem written by modifiers or punctuation, and thus the hopelessness of communicating with others. Wallace’s concern is that the aesthetics of early postmodernism not only encourage the solipsism and disconnection between literature and readers but also among others in everyday life.

The novella ends, however, with the hope of communicative restoration that literature can afford. Or rather, that postmodern aesthetics, in the plurality it invites, can afford communication and not its breakdown or entropic confusion. At the end of the novella, the main characters are still travelling towards the funhouse and a description of the vehicle is given. This description significantly notes an *interruption*:

Hold rapt for that impossible delay, that best interruption: that moment in all radial time when something unseen inside the blur of spokes seems to sputter, catch, and *spin against the spin*, inside. See this thing. See inside what spins *without purchase*. Close your eye. Absolutely no salesmen will call. Relax. Lie back. I want nothing from you...Listen to the silence behind the engines’ noise...Hear it? It’s a love song. For whom? You are loved. (“Westward...” 373; my emphasis).

In this final passage, the car can be taken as a metaphor for literature *as a vehicle* in which the reader *and* the writer are riding. The writer, Wallace, acknowledges this and comes off as sincere but he also risks sounding like a commercial (“Relax” and “Lie back”): a moment, *an*



*interruption*, in which he is saying, *I, the writer, am with you, the reader*. Within the context of the story, the vehicle is postmodern literature, but rather than asking the reader to step outside of the vehicle with him, Wallace is asking the reader to pay attention and see the spin against the spin *inside* postmodern literature, a shift from Early Postmodernism to Late Postmodernism.

That “spin against the spin” is the interruptive moment within literature that connects the author and the reader, together; “you are loved” connotes an intimacy between reader and writer, as love does in Stein’s work. Rather than pointing to itself, Wallace now bends postmodern literature to be about the writer and the reader and the world that they live in, emphasizing the relationality of writers and readers. Further, this acknowledgment of the reader creates a feeling of immediacy. While this immediacy is only a *feeling* and not really an intersubjective engagement between two individuals, as CMC is, Wallace *writes intersubjectivity into the text* in order to move beyond the depthlessness and narcissism that the characters of “Westward...” suffer from. “Westward...” never reaches the Funhouse because the story itself reaches something more important: a dialogical appeal; a connection to the reader and their world, an acknowledgement of a love for the reader, a rupture that brings the writer and reader outside of themselves towards each other.

“The spin against the spin” in postmodern literature that Wallace describes can be understood as a *redefinition*, in which the aesthetics of postmodernism are redefined as humanistic. This humanist redefinition, in this case, alters the postmodern challenge to “representation” to (the feeling of) intersubjectivity and dialogism between author(s) and reader(s) (Hutcheon 32). Judy Smith and Ellen Balka refer to a shift and redefinition of computers and computer use that resonates with the “spin against the spin” of postmodernism towards Late Postmodernist practices. Writing in the 1980s, they address and argue against the

1980s apprehension that the act of partaking in online discussions is dehumanizing and trivialized as feminine. Moreover, they problematize the notion that computers are a “second self,” as proposed by Turkle in the 1980s, in which the computer is not a social one but a “constructive” and “projective medium” for the individual (*The Second Self* 21). For Smith, “chatting” online is rather humanizing because it affords the discussion of those feminist issues which are important to her with others who feel the same way but are not geographically near. She writes,

I’m not too worried that computer chatting on a feminist computer network will be depersonalizing. Our use of the word ‘chatting’ is a good example; the women I work with use that term instead of ‘messaging’ or something more technical...chatting on the feminist computer network: checking in, exchanging ideas, telling a few stories, asking for help on a project, creating community (90-91).

Smith points out that “chatting,” a trivialized term that is largely associated with the internet, is not depersonalizing but rather emphasizes interpersonal connections, relationality, and the acknowledgement of an other; it affords the exchange of ideas, storytelling, and, above all, community. Indeed, long before either Rheingold or Wallace were searching for spaces to build community through literature (via screen or page, respectively), many marginalized communities in the 1980s were already building and living in these (online) spaces. These communities include (but are not limited to) AfroNet, host to African American BBS groups such as Idette Vaughn’s Blacknet BBS (see McGee); INDIANnet, host of many indigenous BBSs such as and Dakota BBS (see Malloy); the LGBTQ Usenet group, soc.motss (see Auerbach), and other “underground” LGBTQ BBSs (see Winkie, interview with CM Ralph); and the Western New

York Disabilities Forum hosted by Paul R. Sadowski on the “Buffalo Free-Net and the Project Enable BBS” (Malloy 22).<sup>33</sup> These communities illustrate Smith and Balka’s characterization of CMC as not self-involved—although it still may be projective and constructive—but oriented towards others and othering; a spin outwards instead of a spin inwards, fostering interactions (through *chatting*) that create spaces for communities to thrive.

The ways that Smith and Balka characterize and redefine CMC echoes Wallace’s arguments for literature’s connection to and acknowledgement of a reader, and the difficulty of working towards this connection and acknowledgement because of a recent history that disregarded the reader in favour of self-referentiality and -reflection. Likewise, Smith argues that CMC’s communication model stresses “interaction, re-definition, and cooperation” (91). Interaction and cooperation emphasize the interdependence of CMC writing, as well as its relationality. Interaction and cooperation also suggest a “self-”<sup>34</sup> or a “networked self” that results from this interdependence and relationality. Although Zizi Papacharissi has recently used the term “networked self” (See “Conclusion: A Networked Self”), Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin provided an earlier definition of “the networked self” in 1999 that represents the kinds of online relationality virtual communities presented to users and writers: “The networked self is made up both of that self that is doing the networking and the various selves that are presented on the network” (Bolter and Grusin 233). The dialogism of CMC (re)defined notions of the everyday self as relational, constituted by the self’s actions and by others the self encounters. As a result, CMC was seen as reliant on others’ cooperation and interaction rather than an authorial presence. Further, “redefinition” is an interesting choice in the context of Late Postmodernism because it

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<sup>33</sup>. For more on these early online communities of marginalized groups, see Judy Malloy’s *Social Media Archeology and Poetics*, pages 20-23.

<sup>34</sup>. Brian Massumi: “Call it a ‘self-.’ The hyphen is retained as a reminder that ‘self’ is not a substantive but rather a relation” (14)

connotes an emergent discourse which seeks to redefine a dominant one, as I am suggesting Late Postmodernism does. I find “redefine” to be more accurate than Huber’s “reconstruction” to refer to Late Postmodernism’s hope in the “(impossible) possibility of communication.” Just as Wallace attempts to redefine postmodern literature towards something more “human” by acknowledging the reader, Smith and Balka (and other cyberenthusiasts, such as Rheingold) attempt to redefine CMC and online interactions as interactive and cooperative rather than “cold” and self-reflective.

If “Westward...” is a critique and redefinition of early postmodernism’s aesthetics and gestures towards an acknowledgement of the reader in the final pages, then Wallace’s “Octet” attempts to establish a cooperation and interaction between reader and writer. “Octet” is a series of “pop quizzes,” scenarios that are presented and then followed up with a question to the reader. But by the fifth pop quiz, “Pop Quiz 9,” the narrator addresses the reader, exposing the writer’s struggles and ideas about the story itself. “Pop Quiz 9” begins with asking the reader to consider the writer’s position: “You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer” (“Octet” 145). The “you” is not just a fiction writer in general, but the fiction writer of this story “attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces” (145). Moreover, this opening statement does more than ask the reader to consider the writer’s position; it calls or names the reader as a writer, a collaborator in its declarative “you are a fiction writer.” The narrator refers to these stories as an “*interrogation*” of the person reading them (145; original emphasis), but also alludes to an interrogation of the writer as well—a mutual interrogation. This “interrogation” is meant to “puncture” the fourth wall, which is understood by the narrator as “a puncturing of the veil of impersonality or effacement around the writer himself” rather than the “fourth wall of realist pretense” (FN2, 147). Moreover, this interrogation is figured as a “sort of interchange or even really *talking* to

you.” The puncturing of impersonality and effacement redefines the writer as personable, in the sense of addressing, acknowledging, and interacting with the reader. But also, the “puncturing” of the fourth wall affords the co-presence of writer and reader, evoking the *feeling* of the writer and reader being in the present together but also stressing the interdependency of writer and reader. While the reader’s responses are not in the text, “Octet” aims to create a feeling of a *conversation* (or chat) with the reader rather than fall back on self-reflection.

In “Octet” Wallace redefines metafictional techniques as a way to engage in conversation with the reader. This redefinition affords, or is meant to afford, interaction and cooperation, in the sense that the reader is actively involved in the production of the text. The narrator describes this relationship as “some sort of weird ambient *sameness*” (155; original emphasis). This sameness is not to suggest that the writer and reader are the same person or share the same values; instead, it is meant to suggest that “writer” should not assume an authority over the reader, much in the way that Jenkins calls both media producers and consumers “participants.” Their sameness is ambient, constituted by the immediate surroundings of the text. This ambience in “Octet” is a feeling, an affect, of sincerity. The narrator argues that in order for the mutual interrogation to work, for the connection to be made between reader and writer, “you’d have to be 100% honest. Meaning not just sincere but almost naked. Worse than naked — more like unarmed. Defenseless. ‘This thing I feel, I can’t name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?’” (“Octet” 154). The narrator describes a necessary *exposure* of (literary) communication and (literary) community; it requires the writer’s vulnerability and the reciprocity of the reader. In fact, the narrator describes this attitude of a writer as being “more like a reader...instead of a *Writer*, whom we imagine to be clean and dry and radiant of command presence and unwavering conviction” (160; original emphasis). The capitalization and emphasis

draw attention to the notion of a writer as an authority who cannot be interacted with. But in “Octet,” the risk of sincerity, of being vulnerable, punctures the authorial wall and involves the reader to be *with* the writer. Like Smith and Balka’s, Rheingold’s, Turkle’s, and Reid’s characterization of CMC written communication, Wallace seeks to characterize literary writing as interactive, cooperative, and collaborative. And sincerity is crucial for upholding this collaborative and interactive “ambience,” but it is a risk that the writer and reader must take.

“Octet” concludes with “Pop Quiz 9,” which asks the reader if they would, as a writer, take the risk of sincerity, considering carefully the reader and how they may respond. The last line of “Octet” is “So decide” (160). This concluding line not only asks the reader to consider if they would risk being sincere as a writer but is also demonstrative of the narrator/writer of the story being “defenseless” and risking being sincere by leaving it up to the reader. The double meaning of “So decide” in the context of this story involves the reader *with* the writer but also places “reader” and “writer” in a dialogical relationship. The involvement of the reader happens across Wallace’s fiction, especially in his novels. *The Broom of the System* ends mid-sentence; *Infinite Jest* demands that the reader extrapolate from the ending to find out how the novel “ends”; and *The Pale King*, although by no means intentional, is unfinished.<sup>35</sup> As “Octet” demonstrates, it is not just the writerly act to address a “you” but also to create a form in which to involve the reader in the production and meaning of the text. That being said, Kelly does point out that a popular trend in Late Postmodernism is to address a “you,” naming Joshua Ferris, Benjamin Kunkel, and Dave Eggers (145-6). Although non-fictional, I would like to add Ta-

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<sup>35</sup>. In episode 5 of *The Great Concavity*, a Wallace-focused podcast, Matthew Bucher, David Laird, and Tim Groenland do mention that Michael Pietsch, Wallace’s editor, was considering of creating an online version of *The Pale King* that allowed owners to arrange the chapters in whichever order they wished. Pietsch admitted that him and Little, Brown could not figure out a way to do so. But it is interesting that they considered involving the reader in the arrangement and structure of Wallace’s last novel.

Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, whose "you" is not generalized (as some "yous" are in the texts cited by Kelly) but situated as Coates' son to discuss what it means to be black in America, and the generational differences in experiences between Coates' and his son's. Though directly personal, *Between the World and Me*'s intimacy and vulnerability invites readers to the text to actively listen in and reflect. Lydia Millet's novel, *My Happy Life*, resonates most specifically with Wallace's "Octet," grounding its metafiction in the real world. *My Happy Life* is about a woman who is left alone in a room, telling her story by writing it on the four walls of her room (the novel is divided into four chapters with headings that correspond to objects in that room). Yet, the woman opens her story with "But I am not alone. I have you" (1). For the narrator, reading introduced her to "absent friends, who always are everywhere and yet nowhere" (22). Upon finishing her story, she, again, addresses the reader but as one addresses a friend: "But you and I have always known about the walls. And we have known the walls are clear as water, and one day they will ripple and tremble and slide down and down and away, into the center of the earth" (149). The woman's life is anything but a "happy" one, marked by sexual abuse and violence. But it is the storytelling and the acknowledgment of a reader, an "absent friend" who is both nowhere and everywhere which frees her from the confinement of the four walls. Like Wallace's narrator in "Octet" breaking the fourth wall of Writerly authority (although it is described in a masculinist way, *puncturing*, than Millet's "slide down and away"), writing in *My Happy Life* is a way of removing the walls of (Writerly) authority and making a connection between writers (whom are also readers) and readers (whom are also writers).

The noted varying metafictional techniques, which, in some form or another, break the fourth wall, are a means of involving the reader to participate in the fiction. And, in a similar vein, CMC was seen as removing a wall that separated writers from readers, senders from

receivers, blurring these lines and troubling the barriers of “authority.” Like Millet’s walls that slide down and away, CMC presented written communication as no longer a “time-biased” medium but a “space-biased” medium that is everywhere and nowhere (Innis). Moreover, the role of sincerity in Late Postmodernism is meant to ensure a literary community that unworks and transcends the market logic of late capitalism. However, “sincerity” and the communities it can afford is not inherent to Late Postmodernist writing; it requires the work and risk of relinquishing any authority in order to establish a connection and trust between self and others. As Kelly argues, “In Wallace’s terms, the greatest terror, but also the only true relief, is the passive decision to relinquish the self to the judgement of the other, and the fiction of the New Sincerity is thus structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader’s attestation and judgement” (145). Similarly, Huber argues that “the re-establishment of a communicative bond...is based not on authority but on authorial surrender” (Huber 38). The Barthesian “death of the author” is met not with anxiety but with relief because it affords a communicative bond between author and reader. As Wallace argues in “Greatly Exaggerated,” “For those of us civilians who know in our *gut* that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, the whole question seems sort of arcane” (144; my emphasis). Wallace dismisses any kind of debate over Barthes’ declaration and does so not based on theory but on what is *felt* when anyone reads, stressing that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another, not between *author* and *reader*. The “birth of the reader” is seen as egalitarian, democratic, and, to Wallace, *obvious* because it importantly acknowledges the reader’s existence and values the role and involvement of the reader to interpret and make sense of the writer’s writing (Barthes, “Death of the Author” 55). The idea of writing as dialogical and immediate—whether it is the intersubjective writing of CMC or the writing of intersubjectivity in literature—



takes hold of the Late Postmodernist imagination, and it is sincerity that is viewed as maintaining this relationship between others. These arguments for intersubjective writing or writing intersubjectivity echo the emphasis on conversation in the Bloomsbury group's aesthetics and in the work of Stein, and the role of sincerity that afforded "conversation."

### **Outside Words: Embodiment, Affect, and Something Happening Off the Page/Screen**

Late Postmodernist writing, however, does not only emphasize a dialogical relationship between writer and reader; it is also contingent on the interrelationship between fiction and the real world, between the page/screen and the surrounding environs. As Zadie Smith suggests, late postmodernist writing points outside words, attempting to make something happen off of the page/screen (a "curious" thing for writing to do). And Wallace suggests that "outside words" is *ambient*. Smith and Wallace imply that if words are no longer pointing to themselves, they are pointing to bodies, lived experiences, and the world in which these bodies and lived experiences occur. And if words are making something happen off of the page, they are *affecting* agency, behaviour, and actions in readers. Just as the uniqueness of sound and voice is embodied and relational in Stein's work, the uniqueness of writing is conceived as embodied and relational in the work of Wallace and his Late Postmodernist contemporaries. Just as Stein opposes the disembodiment rhetoric of radio, Wallace and others counter a disembodiment rhetoric and imagination of the internet. Thus, the tensions within the radio imaginary between a desire for disembodiment and the arguments against this desire re-emerge in the internet imaginary. This section situates Wallace's work within the Late Postmodernist tensions between embodiment and disembodiment, and I assert that Wallace attempts to include an affective relationality between text, bodies, and the world outside of the text through his work to varying success. Wallace involves readers but not only in the sense of meaning-making; Wallace attempts to involve

readers' lived experiences or coaxes them into imagining and feeling others' responses to particular situations. His fictional characters struggle with wanting to leave their bodies behind and the desire to be "in here" (*IJ* 3).

To illustrate the tensions between the internet imaginary of (dis)embodiment, consider these two prominent fictional representations of the internet: William Gibson's cyberspace and Neal Stephenson's Metaverse. In Gibson's *Neuromancer*, cyberspace is described as a place of "disembodied consciousness" (5). Further, only male protagonists are depicted as thriving in cyberspace, reinforcing gendered stereotypes associated with technology that privilege male intellect as pure and characterize female bodies as impure, as represented by the character Molly Millions, a "razorgirl," who has several bodily modifications that fetishize her body. In an oft-quoted passage that describes cyberspace, Gibson presents his protagonist, Case, as "jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix" (5). In contrast, Stephenson's *Snow Crash* presents the Metaverse as containing more than "disembodied consciousness." On his protagonist, Hiro Protagonist, entering Metaverse, Stephenson writes, "He is not seeing real people, of course...The people are pieces of software called avatars. They are the audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse" (35-36). But despite "not seeing real people," Stephenson emphasizes a direct connection between a user's avatar and their body. When one of his friends, Da5id, reads from a scroll containing a virus called "snow crash" in Metaverse, his body is affected, damaged and killed by the virus in real life. After the hospitalization of Da5id, there is this exchange between Hiro and Juanita:

'I don't see the connection between Da5id's computer having a crash, and you calling an ambulance'

‘The Brandy’s scroll wasn’t just showing random static. It was flashing up a large amount of digital information, in binary form. That digital information was going straight into Da5id’s optic nerve. Which is part of the brain, incidentally.’

(Stephenson 199)

Although Gibson does mention that if one dies in cyberspace, the body also dies, *Neuromancer* still presents a techno-utopianism in which it is possible to upload consciousness and live forever. Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* presents avatars as material embodiments of users and suggests that information and what happens in the Metaverse does affect users’ minds and bodies. While snow crash is an extreme and cynical example, online text (“the Brandy’s scroll”) in *Snow Crash* is presented as making something happen off of the screen, mentally, physically, emotionally (“calling an ambulance”). Whereas Gibson presents online interaction as primarily disembodied and separate from what is outside itself, Stephenson presents online interaction as embodied, interdependent, and relational.

These two descriptions of the “internet,” while extreme, reveal a tension in the cultural and literary imaginations and protocols of the internet in America. Because much of the internet in the 80s and early 90s was text-based, there is often a strong pull towards Gibson’s utopian vision of “disembodied consciousness.” In Rheingold’s description of virtual communities, he argues that “[p]eople in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind” (xvii). In his 1996 “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” John Perry Barlow, the co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and a major cyberenthusiast public figure and writer, conceives an internet exactly like Gibson’s cyberspace. In this major cyberenthusiast manifesto, Barlow calls the internet “the new home of Mind” where “weary giants of flesh and steel” are “not welcome among us.” Barlow and other

cyberenthusiast rhetoric reinforces Gibson's binary between a pure space of the mind and an "impure" or corrupted space of "flesh and steel." The rhetoric of disembodiment had its appeal because it promised a pure space—or "frontier," as Barlow and company called it—that was (apparently) not influenced by government or capitalist desire, as the world of flesh and steel is. As Aimée Morrison argues, Barlow's "Declaration" and cyberenthusiasts' rhetoric of disembodiment "chip away at the idea of functional, responsible, common government as an effective and desirable means of structuring civil society, and acts as a powerful normative force promoting the liberal-individualistic, market-based nation of freedom" (67 "An Impossible Future"). The manifesto's rhetoric of disembodiment ends up expressing a neoliberal desire and only reinforces and supports the same capitalism Barlow and others apparently rebel against.

But while the text-based internet could not afford the "audiovisual bodies" of Stephenson's vision, there still was a resistance to a "disembodied" imagination in order to affirm the forms of embodiment that exist in and through text. Often, these cultural imaginations—including Rheingold's—are contradictory or ambivalent, describing online experience as disembodied and embodied in the same book or chapter or paragraph. In Annette Markham's early study of the internet, *Life Online*, she writes of forgetting her body while at the same time noticing her embodiment: "I forget my body. Often, I don't remember it until the physical pain is extreme, and then I resent my body's intrusion on my life online, and my online life's impact on my body" (Markham 59). Markham characterizes her bodily presence as an "intrusion," and admits resentment towards her body. Still, in attempting to articulate leaving her body behind, Markham (dismissively) describes the various forms of embodiment that occur outside of the screen while she is participating in online chat. While Markham does not have to call an ambulance, she vividly describes her body at certain points: "I'm exhausted. My back

hurts. My hands hurt. I'm very thirsty" (Markham 40). Indeed, these are embodiments experienced offline, and are not necessarily integral to online experience; nevertheless, Markham still describes and assigns embodied feelings and physical reactions to participating online. In her descriptions, her body is *not* left behind nor is her consciousness disembodied. Markham's study illuminates the tension between online disembodiment and online embodiment; Markham seems to adopt an imagination of disembodiment, and yet she lets slip the forms of embodiment online engagement involves.

Despite Markham's ambivalence, she still argues for a certain kind of online, textual embodiment that Wallace also attempts to facilitate in his short stories of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and onward. Markham argues, "To be present in cyberspace is to learn how to be embodied there. To be embodied there is to participate" (Markham 23). Markham figures this embodiment as "[t]he experience of being a body in and through text" (48); the more people participate, Markham suggests, the more they become a bodily presence to others. Similarly, Wallace invites readers to participate in the text, and that participation is a form of bodily presence. In "Octet," Wallace refers to the writer's puncturing of the fourth wall as "pok[ing] your *nose* out the mural hole" (154; my emphasis). The presence of the writer and the reader are described as being bodily, or audiovisual. In the series of "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men," which are vignettes of a woman interviewing men about their relationships with women, the reader is invited to participate in the text and imagine and experience the kinds of responses the unnamed interlocutor would have. But Wallace's attempt, like Markham's attempts, are contradictory, and, in Wallace's case, overlooks the writer's own privilege. The invitation to the reader in the series of "Brief Interviews" is indicated by the woman and her questions/responses represented only by "Q." or "Q..." Clare Hayes-Brady argues that "the silenced central figure of

Q, in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, might similarly be reimagined as a locus of projection, rather than as a figure of proscription” (Hayes-Brady 3). For Hayes-Brady, the “Q.” is understood as a locus for the reader’s response to the male interviewee’s mansplaining, inappropriate come-ons to Q., objectifications of women, and self-pitying frustrations with their sex life. The “Q” is a *locus* for the reader to feel their way into and be involved in the text, not just in the act of interpreting but in interrogating, analyzing, and criticizing paternalist and misogynist rhetoric. The reader is coaxed into projecting their responses that are informed by their lived experiences with men like those depicted in the novel or responses that ask the reader to empathize with the interlocutor, or, if the reader is male, to interrogate any similarities between their own lives and the rants of the men in “Brief Interviews.”

However, the woman—Q—is nevertheless silenced and nameless. While Hayes-Brady may read the silenced figure as a locus for the reader’s empathy and embodiment, I read the silenced Q as a form of erasure, removing the woman’s responses and making room for the rants of the men. While Wallace’s intentions may be to critique paternalistic and misogynist rhetoric by highlighting this rhetoric, his motives are still privileged and resonate with the privilege of the male cyberenthusiasts that prioritize the male voice. Although Wallace had previously employed the silent Q in *Infinite Jest*,<sup>36</sup> the technique’s goals in the context of “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men” is flawed. The use of “Q.” in “Brief Interviews...” is flawed in contrast to *Infinite Jest* because *Infinite Jest*’s “Q.” is not one person, and characters assigned to a “Q.” still have speaking roles elsewhere in the novel. Further, the use of “Q.” in *Infinite Jest* resonates with and connects to the various forms of empathy that Wallace explores within the novel. Indeed, the Q may invite readers to participate in “Brief Interviews” and empathize with Q., as

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<sup>36</sup>. See page 665 and its FN 269, as well as FN 234 on pages 1038-1044.

Hayes-Brady suggests, but this participation is at the cost of the woman's voice and her reactions to these experiences. If this is the point of Wallace's technique, it is a problematic one that runs the risk of empathizing with some of the rants of those hideous men.

Whereas Markham seems to suggest that online embodiment is separate from the physical body, Wallace invites readers into the text by drawing from their lived experiences—although, in the case of “Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,” these experiences are typically male—and this becomes very apparent in Chapter 5 when I study *Infinite Jest* online reading groups. Wallace's arguments for the interdependency of literature and reader's lives resonates with the interdependency of online and offline life that other internet users were experiencing. Smith and Balka point out that online spaces, such as the *National Women's Mailing List* (circa '88) and *The Women and Technology Computer Network*, allowed for conversations around feminist concerns that would otherwise not occur or were stifled in the offline communities in which they also belonged to. Judy Smith argues that

[f]or the first time, even here in Missoula, Montana, I can be hooked up with feminists throughout the country and around the world. I can share resources; I can know that I am not alone. This is a particularly significant kind of information to share. For those of us who are part of social change movements, who often don't feel a part of much of the culture around us, we need to know there are lots more of us out here...I don't have to depend on the commercial media which I already know denies me information about feminist projects...Computer literacy can be the same type of liberating force for women in a technological society.

(88)

Smith significantly points out that commercial media (like television) express dominant modes of ideology and patriarchal social beliefs that isolate others. Participation in mailing listservs, however, enables those women who are isolated and marginalized to (re)connect. The mailing listservs are not divorced from offline life, nor are they a space where *only* feminist discourse occurs and is spread. Rather, these online interactions facilitate feminist discourse *and* actions offline. As Smith argues, “A feminist computer network and bulletin board could help *mobilize* those resources for all kinds of educational and political activity” (Smith and Balka 89). Smith and Balka demonstrate that early networks afford agency and provide a space for women who are otherwise silenced and/or isolated by patriarchal institutions and puts them in conversation to form a community. Further, as mentioned above, BBS networks and USEnet newsgroups were central to LGBTQ communities and racialized others. These online spaces are presented by Smith and Balka (but also demonstrated through these early online communities) as fundamentally connected to offline life, and further present these spaces as affecting the mobilization of resources offline. The space of Smith and Balka’s mailing listservs is what Wallace may have intended his “Q” and his fiction to be, as a space of embodied presence via “projection” rather than proscription; the participation is not just in the text itself but involves the textual world and the outside world.

The form of participation that early internet users and Wallace allude to is not a form of “leaving the body behind” but rather a form of recognizing the relationality between text (literary or online), the body, and surrounding environs. Throughout his fiction and nonfiction, Wallace often uses the word “consider” or some similar request to the reader to think about the embodied relationality and affective relationships between literature and the outside world. His unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, begins by asking “you” to “[l]ook around” and “[r]ead these” (*The Pale*



*King* 3, 4). And he asks students in his Kenyon College speech to “pay attention” (*This is Water* 92). These phrases may be partial, but they appear frequently throughout Wallace’s work, framing his work and literature in general as interconnected and engaging with the real world. This urge to “consider,” “pay attention,” and “look around” is a Late Postmodernist form of referentiality that stresses the embodied practices of reading, referring to (but not mirroring) the outside world rather than the text itself. And for Wallace, this effort largely revolves around “love,” as it does in “Westward...” At length in a 1993 interview with McCaffrey, Wallace describes the role of love in the 1990s when postmodern irony has “become our environment” (McCaffrey 49):

it seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It’s got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved. I know this doesn’t sound hip at all. I don’t know. But it seems like one of the things really great fiction-writers do...is *give* the reader something. The reader walks away from real art heavier...Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naive or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something...And the effort actually to do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind of courage I don’t seem to have yet. I don’t see that courage in Mark Leyner or Emily Prager or Brett Ellis. (50-1)

While Wallace suggests that previous Early Postmodern writers and writers before them do achieve what he outlines as what good art does, his characterization of “good art” as “something

to do with love” is a Late Postmodernist one. For Wallace in particular, Late Postmodernist art’s aim is to make the reader *feel*, to affect the reader by being open and vulnerable, which is a risk on the author’s part. But this risk is necessary to establish literature’s connection to the real world. Interestingly, when he refers to a “good” postmodern author, Thomas Pynchon, he refers to him as “the Pynchon of *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” a likely jab at Pynchon’s 1990 follow-up to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *Vineland*, which had received disappointing reviews from critics and probably received Wallace’s criticism for the novel’s excessive pop cultural references.

The Late Postmodernist interconnectedness of literature and the world is typically situated in literature’s connections to the author’s and others’ lived experiences rather than literature’s engagement with the representation of lives. This “connection” to the real world via lived, embodied experiences have most blatantly appeared in the form of realism (or neo-realism) but has also appeared as a form of self-reflective playfulness. Take Lydia Davis’s “Happiest Moment.” The story is quoted in full:

If you ask her what is a favorite story she has written, she will hesitate for a long time and then say it may be this story that she read in a book once: an English language teacher in China asked his Chinese student to say what was the happiest moment in his life. The student hesitated for a long time. At last he smiled with embarrassment and said that his wife had once gone to Beijing and eaten duck there, and she often told him about it, and he would have to say that the happiest moment of his life was her trip, and the eating of the duck. (Davis “Happiest Moment”)

The story concerns intertextuality, common in Early Postmodern texts, but its intertextuality is not just between texts but between lived experiences as well; Davis’s intertextuality is one that

weaves texts and lived experiences together. The story begins outside literature, with the questioning of the author by a reader about a favourite story she has written. But rather than her *own writing*, she refers to a story written by an English language teacher in China that she had read. This brief movement towards literature then moves back outward, with the story of the Chinese student's happiest moment *told* to the English language teacher, which moment is one that was experienced by his wife and told to him. The structural moment of the story establishes the relational being of literature, that they are always drawn from our embodied experiences in the world and the stories that are told between beings.

Davis's story argues that an individual's writing is informed by their own and others' lived experiences, and those lived experiences do not exclude reading as separate from lived experiences. Writing, Late Postmodernism demonstrates, is not written *ex nihilo*; it is formed through the lived, embodied experiences of others. Writing on contemporary black American writing, E. Lâle Demirtürk notes that narratives by black Americans by the late 1980s into the present "engage with the effect of racist assumptions, concerns, and attitudes grounded in the everyday lived experiences of African Americans (and other people of color) in the material reality of a white supremacist society" (xv). Moreover, he adds that the emphasis on "lived experiences" by black American writers like Walter Mosley, Martha Southgate, John Edgar Wideman, and Asha Bandele is a response to black American early postmodernism that use "dominant narratives of racial representation" to parody "these forms and reveal them to be textual constructs rather than authentic reflections of black life" (Dubey and Goldberg, "New Frontiers," 567)" (xviii). The movement from Early to Late Postmodernism may be characterized as a movement *from textuality to materiality*. Late Postmodernism's emphasis on lived experiences is an emphasis on literature's connection to the material world and its embodiments.

Though cyberspace was heavily characterized as disembodied and immaterial, there are significant admittances or narratives that stress this Late Postmodern emphasis of the material world and its embodiments. As Smith and Balka argue, online communities and their written resources are significantly shaped by members' lived experiences and affect members' lives within these online communities. And despite Rheingold's claim that people in virtual communities leave their bodies behind, he does describe the relationality and affect between users in the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) BBS in *The Virtual Community*. Moreover, Rheingold argues that the sharing of life stories that refer to embodied practices and bodies are what create community online. He relates a story of a WELL user's documentation of his daughter's illness, updating the Parenting conference on his daughter's status as well as his mental health. Rheingold describes other WELL users and himself as "[s]itting in front of our computers with our hearts racing and tears in our eyes" (4). And when the daughter recovered, news of her recovery "relieved our anxieties." Rheingold draws attention to the emotional and *embodied* affective reactions that the parenting community experience: their hearts racing, tears in their eyes, and an anxiety that was *felt*. But in addition to these emotional and embodied reactions, Rheingold also notes the sharing of embodied knowledge. When another user's son was diagnosed with leukemia, a member shared his own experiences with and knowledge of leukemia to aid and console the parent (5-6). For Rheingold, these instances demonstrate the affect of the written word that was not just limited to the screen or to sharing emotions online. He writes, "we had the power not only to use words to share feelings and exchange helpful information, but *to accomplish things in the real world*" (12; my emphasis). The sharing of literature/writing online is characterized as also a sharing of lived experiences, information and knowledge about being in the world.

These online interactions that Rheingold focuses on contradict his earlier statement that “we leave our bodies behind” and illuminate N. Katherine Hayles’ argument that the liberal humanist subject “*possessed* a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body” (4). The investment in the rhetoric of disembodiment in Rheingold’s text and in others’ writings stem from the kind of techno-utopianism and neoliberal desire featured in Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and in Barlow’s “Declaration” that characterize the body and real world as impure (“flesh and steel”) in contrast to the pure (“Mind”), which often privileges male, intellect. Yet, these instances of bodily affect and effects in Rheingold’s text demonstrate that online interactions have affects and effects in the world outside of the screen and that Rheingold cited these interactions as important and vital to online communities. These slippages of bodily affect in Rheingold’s text demonstrate that he cannot write about online community or community in general without discussing embodiment and the vulnerability of bodies on- and off-line; writing on online interactions inevitably leads to addressing the material effects and affects of being online. While some writers, like Barlow, make a conscious effort to emphasize the disembodiment of online community, Rheingold’s slippages demonstrate an ambiguity that allows for these slippages of embodiment and vulnerability in writing about online community and online interactions.

Although Wallace may not be entirely aware of the ways in which his writing silences the woman in the stories of “Brief interviews” (or the problematics of doing so), he does express an awareness of the ways in which people can silence or censor others through writing when engaging in the risk and vulnerability of communication. In “The Devil is a Busy Man,” Wallace draws attention to the mediation of writing in order to present the double bind of written communication: while writing does have intersubjective potential, it also contains the potential to silence and exert authority over the reader. In the short story, Wallace explores the ideas that the

authoritarian response to written communication is not always intended but can be a knee-jerk reaction to the *risk* and vulnerability of written communication. “The Devil Is a Busy Man” is narrated by an unnamed individual, who chooses to remain unnamed because he “did a nice thing for someone” but “can not say more than this, or it will empty what I did of any of its true, ultimate value” (190). It is revealed that the “nice thing” is a monetary gift but the narrator does not wish to reveal any further details because doing so will make the individual “selfish” (191). Yet, in his attempts to conceal the details he silences and deceives the person receiving the gift *and* the reader. The narrator narrates that the receiver of the gift calls and asks if the narrator “by any possible chance, know anything about who was responsible for \_\_\_\_\_, because he just wanted to tell that person, ‘thank you!,’ and what a God-send this \_\_\_\_\_ dollars that came, seemingly, out of nowhere from the \_\_\_\_\_, was, etc” (191). The dashes are indicative of the authoritative control the narrator has over the reader and the receiver of the gift, censoring the other and preventing the reader’s attempts at interpreting the events of the story. By the end of the story, the narrator realizes that “I showed an unconscious and, seemingly, natural, automatic ability to both deceive myself and other people” and had done something “which could only be classified as ‘dark,’ ‘evil,’ or ‘beyond hope of ever sincerely becoming good’” (193). “The Devil is a Busy Man” makes the reader aware of literature as a form of communication *with* the reader but does so by having the narrator selfishly attempt to control the censoring of the story’s details, *as well as* the details about the narrator. Wallace exposes the fabrication of the narrator’s story with the dashes, drawing attention to the mediation of writing and the ways in which barriers are placed by the writer to keep the reader and writer apart.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>. In section 9 of *The Pale King*, the “Author’s Forward,” Wallace writes that legal devices and copyright disclaimers are a “lie” that separate author and their fiction from the real world (69). Interestingly, he calls the book “more like a memoir” and states that [t]his book is really true” (67). Since the book is unfinished, it is unclear how exactly this “memoir” genre would develop in the novel, but the passages on legal devices and autobiography

“The Devil is a Busy Man” demonstrates the fear of vulnerability that sharing stories elicits. The narrator of “The Devil Is a Busy Man” notes that his selfish censoring and deception is “seemingly natural,” implying that to do the opposite—to be vulnerable and share—would be uncomfortable, require effort, and be “unnatural.” Elsewhere in Wallace’s work, this kind of “natural” selfishness is described as a “default setting” (*This Is Water* 123). The sharing of embodied experiences in writing, the vulnerability of sharing, and the relationality that sharing forms between literature and individuals’ lives, becomes of particular importance in Wallace’s mid-to-late writing as it is a means of getting out of that default setting. In *Infinite Jest*, specifically, there are characters who struggle with being in the world and expressing the neoliberal desire to be free of the body. The novel opens with Hal Incandenza’s plea, “I am in here” (3), and Boston AA residents refer to staying sober as being “In Here” as supposed to “Out There” (374). In the novel, addiction and depression are tangentially linked with not wanting to feel anything and feeling disconnected. Kate Gombert, a character who struggles with depression and is committed to the halfway house, Ennet House, stresses to the doctor at the hospital, “It’s not wanting to hurt myself it’s wanting to *not hurt*.” (78; original emphasis). Similarly, the narrator points out that “Something they seem to omit to mention in Boston AA when you’re new and out of your skull with desperation and ready to eliminate your map...they somehow omit to mention that the way it gets better and you get better is *through pain*” (445-6; my emphasis). Being in the world and being with others is presented as bodily affective in a painful or exhaustive sense; it entails vulnerability, mentally and physically. Ennet house is described as “reek[ing] of passing time. It is the humidity of early sobriety, hanging and palpable” (279). Sobriety and being in the world is sensorial and palpable, and “reeks” suggests an unpleasant

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suggest a serious attempt on Wallace’s part to involve the reader and to demonstrate fiction’s connection to the real world, despite legalities and subjectivity that may cast a shadow on the truth of the novel.

sensory overload. Depression and addiction are presented as a kind of “waning of affect” in Wallace’s fiction, in which the individual retreats into the self and is disconnected from their environment and from others, not wanting to feel and not wanting to be in the world (Jameson). Wallace goes to great lengths to share narratives of suffering, vulnerability, and violence in the novel in order to emphasize and argue the palpability and embodiment of being in the world.

Although being in the world in Wallace’s work is depicted as suffering, Wallace suggests that the sensory overload of being in the world can be overcome by being with others and sharing the narratives of pain and suffering; vulnerability in the novel contains the potential to form empathic connections between others, as well as forming communities. Describing the Enfield Tennis academy students after drills, the narrator notes, “[g]roup empathy is expressed via sighs, further slumping, small spastic gestures of exhaustion, the soft clanks of skulls’ back against the lockers’ thin steel” (*Infinite Jest* 100). Community is communicated not through anything said but through the vulnerability of bodily affect and the recognition of this shared vulnerable embodiment. As Hal Incandenza points out, “The suffering *unites* us” (113; original emphasis). The strong juxtaposition between the tennis academy and the painfulness of time passing in the half-way house causes the reader to reflect on the bodies of others in the novel. And quite possibly, Wallace intends readers to reflect on their own body and their insecurities. Attention to the body and the vulnerability this attention evokes can unite people, as it does for the characters of the novel. In *The Pale King*, especially, non-superficial attention to the body is characterized as spiritual, even—it is an attention that is not selfish but encourages self-love *and* relational-being. The vulnerability of embodiment across Wallace’s work after *Infinite Jest* does not guarantee community and an inner spirituality—individuals can and do retreat into their self



because of the feelings of vulnerability—but it carries the potential of community, the potential of individuals accepting and managing relational being.

But despite Wallace's attention to bodies and embodiment in *Infinite Jest*, the novel is afflicted by the same kind of ambivalence and contradiction that dominated 1990s rhetoric of online spaces. Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Robertson have recently pointed out that the AA scenes in *Infinite Jest* are presented as an “apparently subject-less realm” in which “all such [racialized and gendered] markers must be disavowed” in order for members to “Identify” with each other (Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts n.p.). They demonstrate that the maxims of AA “imply a white male subject” in which all members are compared to, thereby “absenting” racialized and gendered bodies. Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts question the primacy and importance that past criticism has given to these AA scenes in *Infinite Jest*, drawing attention to contradictions that the novel presents. The attention to the body and embodiment is important to the novel, but Wallace missteps and contradictorily omits markers of racialized and gendered bodies, privileging a white male subjectivity presented as universal. While I argue that Wallace is part of the Late Postmodernist movement to address embodiment and attempt to have the page/screen connect to the reader's environs and the world of the reader, he is not the “leader” of this movement and it is important to acknowledge that Wallace does not acknowledge race or poorly handles the issue of race and embodiment. Indeed, embodiment continued to be a concern for Wallace throughout his career: *Oblivion's* “The Suffering Channel” is about the intimacy of embodiment between people and articulates Wallace's (and Stein's) fears of a mass media public that steal away that intimacy; *The Pale King*, as aforementioned, contains a thematic thread of the relationship between embodiment and self-care/love that is spiritual, communal, and non-narcissistic. But for a writer who urges others to “pay attention,” Wallace was not always

attentive to this blind spot of his. In this regard, Wallace shares a common fallacy in much academic and popular writing on the internet during the 1990s and early 2000s that overlooked race and embodiment online, but Wallace significantly departs from them because of his constant return to and revision of attitudes towards embodiment throughout his career.

**Such Democratic Hope....Much Democratic Failure: Wallace's "Authority and American Usage" and Howard Rheingold's *Virtual Community***

Behind the aesthetics of sincerity and the dialogical appeal that are shared by Late Postmodernist literature and writing about the internet during the late 1980s to early 2000s, there looms a hope in writing's potential to inspire and affect democratic sensibilities amongst individuals. Wallace's major work on American democracy is, appropriately enough, a review of an American Usage dictionary. And the kind of rhetoric Wallace employs in that essay/review significantly resonate and, in some parts, intersect with Rheingold's writings on democracy in his influential and popular book, *Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Rheingold's book attracted the attention of the American public, journalists, and academics who were writing and thinking about "virtual communities" and the validity of communities online. *The Virtual Community* put forth an argument (albeit, a utopian one) that communities *do* exist online, and his definition of "virtual communities" is still used to this day by scholars. Rheingold's *Virtual Community* and Wallace's "Authority and American Usage" share views on democracy, community, and the affect of the written word that is necessary for maintaining both democracy and community on- and off-line. Both argue for an openness and an infinite attention to the other. And they both find that careful attention and consideration of language and language use is necessary for maintaining this infinite openness and attention. Rheingold argues that virtual communities' reciprocity transcends "market-based culture" and is "a kind of gift

economy in which people do things for one another out of a spirit of building something between them, rather than a spreadsheet-calculated quid pro quo” (49). Thus, despite Rheingold and Wallace writing on different media—Wallace, the page; Rheingold, online CMC—both writers share arguments about the political significance of the written word because of the plurality it can invite when authors and authority/ies are decentered. Similar to Stein’s democratic poetics that argue for aural/oral plurality to the text when read out loud, Rheingold and Wallace’s conception of democratic writing is founded in the acute awareness of others’ language use in writing. Or, to put it another way, rather than Stein’s call for listening to how others *talk*, Rheingold and Wallace call for an attention to how others *write*. Moreover, this attention to an other’s language use and writing is situated in the present, or, in Wallace’s case, acknowledges the present presence of the other/reader. However, while both demonstrate an awareness of the potential failure of this democratic hope, they both overlook the lack of diversity and/or fail to implement their arguments in their work. Together, Wallace and Rheingold illuminate Late Postmodernists’ democratic hope in written language, its messy contradictions and ambivalence, and, in some ways, its failures.

What Rheingold and Wallace share in their conceptualization of community is *language*, particularly in writing, and the agency that language gives to the self and to community. For Wallace especially (Rheingold is less explicit on this front), language is what allows for communities to foster and affords democratic deliberation. Wallace argues that “you can’t escape language: language is everything and everywhere; it’s what lets us have anything to do with one another” (“American Usage and Authority” 70). Wallace specifically alludes to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, which largely informs him on the philosophical debate on language and language use. In his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace states that

Wittgenstein “makes language dependent on human community” in order to counter the solipsistic argument of language made in his earlier book, the *Tractatus* (44). Wallace elaborates: “it’s not that language *is* us, but we’re still *in* it, inescapably” (45). Wallace finds this argument “sound,” or rather, he takes comfort in this notion of language as not something that is alienating but is rather the building blocks of community and human relationships and democracy. Wallace’s late Wittgensteinian understanding of language is, as Nicoline Timmer argues, emblematic of Late Postmodernism’s approaches to language and writing. Timmer associates Wittgenstein’s early solipsistic philosophy on language with early postmodernist conceptions of language and identity, wherein language *is* us and we are determined by the linguistic structures we live in. Late Postmodernism, instead, is associated with Wittgenstein’s later concepts of language games and rule following. Timmer explains: “The assumption that the self is mediated, structured in language still stands, but instead of surrendering to a form of linguistic determinism, the focus is on language *use* and for that what is needed is a conception of the self as language user: or as *storyteller*” (Timmer 41; original emphasis). Importantly, this conception of language is what gives language users *agency* rather than being determined and stuck within a linguistic domain.<sup>38</sup> In this way, communities and their linguistic domains are never determining; a community does not determine the individuals but is formed by the reciprocal engagement between others and the language they use. This reciprocal engagement between others and their language use, and the intimacies of this engagement, is what Wallace and Rheingold (and Stein) value greatly in their writing on democracy and/or the democratic aesthetics of literature.

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<sup>38</sup>. It is interesting to note that early postmodernist literature contains examples of not only linguistic determinism but also technological determinism that dehumanizes the human. In Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s *Anxiety of Obsolescence*, she notes the anxiety of Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon towards the obsolescence of the American novel as a result of such technology like TV. In William Gaddis’s *JR*, characters are fragmented, obsolesced (killed), misunderstood, and dehumanized in a flurry of communication technologies.

In “Authority and American Usage,” Wallace firmly establishes that language and language use (particularly *written* language use) in a community is political. He uses the review of Bryan Garner’s *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (*ADMAU*) in order to articulate the political significance of language use and the necessary attention to written language that is required to facilitate and foster democratic culture. Wallace writes, “If words’ and phrases’ meanings depend on transpersonal rules and these rules on community consensus, then language is not only non-private but also irreducibly *public, political, and ideological*” (FN32 88; original emphasis). By non-private, Wallace means that language is interpersonal and, thus, fundamentally relational. In the essay, Wallace aligns political ideologies to two different theories of language usage in order to articulate his argument—prescriptivists are referred to as “linguistic conservatives” and descriptivists are referred to as “linguistic liberals” (79). What Wallace admires about Garner’s *ADMAU* is that he is able to “be extremely prescriptive without any appearance of evangelism or elitist put-down” (78); that is, Garner states his position, and yet acknowledges and addresses the descriptivist theory. This ability of Garner’s, Wallace stresses, is exemplary of the “Ethical Appeal” in language use. Wallace defines the Ethical Appeal as “a complex and sophisticated ‘Trust Me.’ It’s the boldest, most *democratic* of rhetorical Appeals because it requires the rhetor to convince us not just of his intellectual acuity or technical competence but his basic decency and fairness and *sensitivity* to the audience’s own *hopes and fears*” (77; my emphasis). The Ethical Appeal is characterized by Wallace as the “most democratic” appeal because it recognizes the other and acknowledges a dialogic relationship, rather than an authoritarian relationship, between others who approach language use/writing differently. Moreover, Wallace argues that the Ethical Appeal does not only appeal to a character, as *ethos* is typically defined, but to emotions as well without mentioning *pathos*.

Instead, *ethos*—the Ethical Appeal—describes a character that is sensitive and respectful to the vulnerabilities and emotions of others, while also being vulnerable to those others. Wallace characterizes “democracy,” then, as affecting vulnerability and openness wherein individuality is maintained but is not closed off from or dominates others.

Wallace calls this conceptualization of democracy as promoting vulnerability and openness “The Democratic Spirit.” Wallace’s definition of the Democratic Spirit resonates with Rheingold’s arguments about democracy in *The Virtual Community*, both emphasizing the “unworking” of community that ensures a democratic sensibility among those in community with each other. Wallace defines the Democratic Spirit as “one that combines rigor and humility, i.e., *passionate conviction plus a sedulous respect for the convictions of others*. As any American knows, this is a difficult spirit to *cultivate* and maintain” (“Authority...” 72; my emphasis).

Democracy is that which combines the political, the ethical, and the affective together, making them interdependent and complex. Moreover, the balance between passionate conviction and sedulous respect is what keeps the individual from slipping into a solipsistic isolation and from absorbing and/or being absorbed by the other, hence why it is difficult to cultivate and maintain.

Wallace elaborates:

A true Democratic Spirit is up there with religious *faith* and *emotional* maturity and all those other top-of-the-Maslow-Pyramid-type qualities that people spend *their whole lives working on*. A Democratic Spirit’s constituent rigor and humility and *self-honesty* are, in fact, so hard to maintain on certain issues that it’s almost irresistibly tempting to fall in with some established dogmatic camp and to follow that camp’s line on the issue and to let your position harden within the camp and

become inflexible and to believe that the other camps are either evil or insane.

(72; my emphasis)

Faith suggests a surrendering of the self, although not wholly, to the attestation and judgement of an other, as well as embracing single-entendre principles (to want to believe in something). And emotional maturity suggests an acknowledgement of the affective relationships the self is situated within and a respect for others in these relationships. Furthermore, this Democratic Spirit, one which demands faith and a sedulous, emotional respect for others is one that an individual is always *working* on. Or, as Nancy, Blanchot, and Agamben, put it, the Democratic Spirit requires *unworking*: a constant cultivation and maintenance that ensures that the individual is never dogmatic and stable but always mediating between a passionate conviction and a sedulous respect for others, between rigor and humility.

In Rheingold's rhetoric of CMC's democratic potential, he, too, argues that democracy's existence in CMC depends on passionate conviction and sedulous respect for others, although not quite in those words. Despite Rheingold's utopian rhetoric throughout *The Virtual Community*, he does not share with his fellow cyberenthusiasts the idea that the internet is inherently democratic, as John Perry Barlow does. Rheingold argues, in the concluding pages of the book, "When people who have become fascinated by BBS or networks start spreading the idea that such networks are inherently democratic in some magical way, without specifying the hard work that must be done in real life to harvest the fruits of that democratizing power, they run the danger of becoming unwitting agents of commodification" (286). Both Rheingold and Wallace evoke a kind of pastoralization of democracy: it must be cultivated and harvested. Unlike his colleague Barlow, who is steeped in neoliberalist market logic and has made claims of inherency, Rheingold argues that the work of community is that which unworks

commodification, it works against the idea that the individual is granted agency through consumption. As Nancy argues, unworking prevents individuals and the community from being “objectifiable and producible” (31). Like Wallace, Rheingold stresses that continuous hard work is what people have to do “their whole lives” in order to maintain democracy, and it is hard because of the temptations of avoiding vulnerability and falling into a “camp.” Claims of democratic inherency, Rheingold suggests, make individuals hardened, closed off, inflexible, and thus objectifiable and producible; it prevents democracy from coming to fruition and invites commodification.

Moreover, Rheingold argues, in a very Wallace-like way, that democracy in CMC must be maintained by “simple, corny, all-powerful love.” Love, for Rheingold and Wallace, affords reciprocal engagement between others. Rheingold writes,

simply, corny, all-powerful *love* [is] the only way to make a community work when it is diverse, thus guaranteeing friction, and at the same time *committed* to free expression, which can and does go out of hand. A core of people must *flat-out believe* in the possibility of community and *keep coming back* to that amid the emotional storms in order for the whole loosely coupled group to hold together at all. (53; my emphasis)

Just as Wallace stresses conviction and respect, Rheingold stresses commitment and love. As I argued in Chapter Two in connection with Stein’s poem “Ada,” love is the work of attention and reciprocal engagement; love requires listening and talking. Or, in the context of CMC and literature, love requires the dialogical appeal of reading and writing, an acknowledgement of and respect for others and their stories. Further, both Rheingold and Wallace figure democracy and democratic practice as a faith, as something to believe in and to continually work at in order to



prevent people, in emotional storms, from retreating into themselves; it affects vulnerability and ensures, by encouraging people to keep coming back, an openness. An openness is flexible and vulnerable; it can bend towards others, but it does not break and lose its individual shape.

The importance of vulnerability and openness in democracy, for Wallace, is that it coaxes individuals to share with others their “untrendy” human issues, establishing an intimate reciprocity between others. The “storytelling” agency of individuals is a means of mediating the contemporary fractured world, creating a plurality that this vulnerable storytelling affords. What Wallace means by “untrendy” is not directly involving emotions and troubles, although these are central, but rather involving the *human*. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace states that American fiction should “[i]n dark times....locate[] and appl[y] CPR to those elements of what’s human and magical that still live and glow despite the times’ darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it’d find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it” (McCaffery 26). For Timmer, Wallace’s rhetoric of what good fiction is reveals a “melancholic structure of affect, revolving around a ‘loss’” (45). That loss, for Timmer, is “the lack of the human,” but the loss should rather be understood as a lack of vulnerability that the shield of irony—the culprit for Wallace—causes (45). For Wallace, good fiction should represent the world in which readers live in (“depict”) and point to (“illuminate”) the possibilities of human existence and agency in the world (“possibilities for being alive and human”). By doing so, I argue that those “possibilities” demands a plurality of experiences of being alive and human. Thus, the democratic aesthetics of Wallace’s conception of fiction is to acknowledge and invite possibility, and thus plurality, within a worldview; a worldview must be inclusive in its demonstration of being alive and human.

In Rheingold's descriptions of online communities, the online spaces are represented as able to "apply CPR to those elements of what's human and magical"—that is, Rheingold believes that CMC can also illuminate the possibilities, or to bring awareness to the possibilities, of being human and alive in the world. Rheingold defends CMC against arguments that claim cyberspace is "cold," that somehow informal writing "is less authentically human" (24). Rather, he points out that these claims do not "take into consideration people who use the medium for *genuine human interaction*" (Rheingold 24; my emphasis). Although Rheingold notes that there is potential for users to abuse this medium, he stresses, that the medium is being used for genuine human interaction. Throughout *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold showcases the variety of communities that come together in the BBS WELL under conference topics such as Parenting and broader categories like Arts, Body-Mind-Health, Entertainment, and so on. Rheingold goes to great lengths to humanize this online community, to demonstrate that "the system is the people" and that these online communities refer to and participate in the outside, real world (43). In his definition of virtual communities, one which is still referred to today, Rheingold argues that virtual communities are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient *feeling*, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (5; my emphasis). For Rheingold, it is the affects of intimacy—vulnerability and genuine interaction—that form the "webs" of communities. And in the aptly titled chapter, "The Heart of the Well," Rheingold documents a number of cases in which CMC users provide emotional support for parenting, or for an individual suffering from Leukemia, or for each other when a member commits suicide. Rheingold argues that these instances of emotional support "*knit us together*," thereby creating the intimacy of community (3; my

emphasis). But, moreover, it is the sharing of these experiences, and that intimacy created by this sharing, that aggregates a plurality of possibilities of being alive and human in the world.

Rheingold's emphasis on vulnerability and openness is ultimately what separates his rhetoric from other cyberenthusiasts' rhetoric; he moves beyond technological determinism, at least with regard to the democratic potential of the internet, to focus on the interdependency between American culture and the technology of the internet and CMC. In this way, Wallace and Rheingold's arguments on the interdependency between American culture and the technology of the internet resonates with Vivian Sobchack's arguments on the relationship between technology and politics. Sobchack argues, "Rather than make up an impossible future in which technology does all the political work that properly—and presently—is the province of human beings, we should dismantle utopic scenarios surrounding technology to reveal the deep ambivalences, contradictions, and confluences within them" (88). In their writing on democracy and writing/language use, Rheingold and Wallace attempt to re-center democracy within the province of human beings and language but also acknowledge the constraints and limitations of doing so. Rheingold does admit that the internet is *not* going to be free of corporations. He writes, "The odds are always good that big power and big money will find a way to control access to virtual communities; big power and big money always found ways to control new communications media when they emerged in the past" (5). Rather than lament this fact, he posits his hope for democracy, like Wallace, not in technology but in humans and their relationship to language. He continues, "And I admit that I still believe that this technology, if properly understood and defended by enough citizens, does have democratizing potential in the way that alphabets and printing presses had democratizing potential" (279). Rheingold interestingly draws attention to the historic interrelationship between language, technology, and democracy, and situates the

human use of the internet in that very lineage. Rheingold demonstrates that he shares a Late Postmodernist sentiment that places faith in humanity and the (re)connective powers of language that can establish and fulfill the need for a “structure of we.”

However, both Wallace and Rheingold do not always reveal the contradictions or shortcomings of their own work towards those democratic goals of language and communication. Rheingold can be rather overly enthusiastic and uncritically utopian throughout his book. His focus on communities is universalizing and overlooks the private communities and “intimate publics” of others<sup>39</sup> (Bury 16). Moreover, Rheingold falls into the rhetoric of disembodiment when he states that “we leave our bodies behind” online, and yet he contradictorily notes that the online communities exist offline, too, as well as mentioning the kinds of embodied practices that occur in the virtual community (3). As Hayles points out, this rhetoric of disembodiment is exactly what allows for Rheingold and other cyberenthusiasts to claim their “notorious universality” (4). Despite Rheingold’s insistence on maintaining democracy and community online, he ignores his colleagues’ rhetoric that conflated “democracy” with a market logic of capitalism and neoliberalism. As Vivian Sobchack points out, this is nothing new: “the history of American democracy—indeed, its very mythos—is contained in a conflated notion of ‘franchise’ that brings human individual political freedom into alignment with ‘individual’ corporate freedom” (79). In his 2004 short story “Mr. Squishy,” Wallace provides this very critique of cyberenthusiasts’ ignorance of their own contribution to the neoliberal market and to capitalism’s exploitation and capitalization of their counterculture. Set at an ad agency, Wallace notes that one product, Jolt, “had worked to position itself as a recreational beverage for digital-era phreaks and dweebs and had managed at once to

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<sup>39</sup>. Bury makes this critique of Rheingold’s book (16). For “intimate publics,” see Berlant’s *The Female Complaint* and Morrison’s “Suffused by Feeling and Affect.”

acknowledge, parody, and event the computer-dweeb as an avatar of individual rebellion” (“Mr. Squishy” 46). Further, demonstrating a prescient knowledge of today’s online personalized ads, Wallace describes that the ad agency “involved finding ways to exploit cybercommerce’s staggering research potential as well. Undisplayed little tracking codes could be designed to tag and follow each consumer’s w<sup>3</sup>[sic] interests and spending patterns” (“Mr. Squishy” 63). While this critique is not the focus of “Mr. Squishy,” the short story demonstrates the shift of market capitalism into the internet, and the way that capitalism feeds off of and feeds back the neoliberal market logic of the cyberenthusiasts. While Rheingold may have been aware of the eventual commercialization of the internet, he had overlooked the ways in which he and his colleagues contributed to the very commercialization of the internet that they resisted.

While Wallace demonstrates an excruciating self-awareness in his approach(es) to writing and exhibits exceptional knowledge in language use and the debates around language use, his work does not always actualize the arguments he has made for what literature should do and he does not always pay attention to the language that he uses. Despite Wallace’s arguments that literature should illuminate what is alive and human in the world, David Rando argues that the majority of his fictional characters are affectless and struggle with being alive and human. Mary K. Holland has pointed out that *Infinite Jest*—considered by some to be the actualization of the idea of good fiction that Wallace laid out in interviews and in “E Unibus Pluram”—fails in its attempt to escape the loop of narcissism and irony (218). Rather, the book, like the novel’s film “Infinite Jest” is a “failed attempt at healing whose clean-up attempt only begets more solipsistic mess” (Holland 239). Moreover, there is Wallace’s avoidance of race in America, and the stereotypes he can fall into when representing women and racialized others. *Infinite Jest*’s “Wardine” section and the short story “John Billy” contain an attempt at African American

Vernacular English (AAVE), which some have pointed out reads like a parody of AAVE it is so poorly done. As the next chapter will demonstrate, readers in online reading groups (more than academic work on Wallace) have drawn attention to and discuss these poor representations of race and gender in *Infinite Jest* and elsewhere in his earlier work, and thereby challenge the democratic hope and aesthetics he places in his writing. Although Wallace's later writing is more mature, thoughtful, respectful, and follows through with his earlier arguments about language and literature, Wallace's work still focuses mostly on the white cis het male American experience.<sup>40</sup>

Rheingold and Wallace, then, intersect in two ways in regard to the written language's democratic potential. One, they both demonstrate much theoretical hope in the written word's democratic potential; but, two, their execution in their work of this democratic potential ends up in a failure to be intersectional. That failure is the result of ignorance or the avoidance of inclusivity, a result of utopian tendencies in their writing. While Rheingold advocated for the internet's inclusivity and diversity, he overlooks the fact that the majority of WELL users are white, privileged Californians. And while Wallace argued for literature's inclusivity by illuminating the possibilities of being human and alive in the world, Wallace's literature is predominantly focused on white male experiences. Despite these failures, Rheingold and Wallace share a Late Postmodernist hope in writing (whether in literature or in CMC) and its ability to transcend market logic and enter the realm of the "gift," wherein reciprocity and mutual respect between others can occur. This hope in writing, however, is not naïve; both Rheingold and Wallace acknowledge the constant work and attention, a persistent mediation of fractured

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<sup>40</sup>. Interestingly, despite the cringe worthy attempts at inclusivity in Wallace's earlier work (*The Broom of the System*, *Girl With Curious Hair*), it is this period that he is at his most inclusive, featuring female protagonists, LGBTQ relationships, and people of colour.

lives, that writing's democratic potential relies on. Failure should not be seen as an end, but as a continuation of the work and attention that is necessary to maintain this democratic work in writing. As Clare Hayes-Brady argues, Wallace's "persistent invocation of plurality...along with his resistance to teleological structures, infuses his writing with a sense of the necessity of continuation, and provides the thematic and structural...center of his creative output. Thus, the purpose of writing...is not to *find* closure, but to resist it, to frame the possibilities of meaning" (2). Moreover, Jack Halberstam argues that failure "also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects [disappointment, disillusionment, and despair] to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (3). As the next chapter will show, the recognition of Wallace's failures extends discussions about the possibilities of literature and pokes holes in positive-only discussions of Wallace; Wallace's failures invite the reader in to comment, critique, respond, and feel their place in his work. Indeed, any failure invites this response, but it becomes especially important when that author is, as Wallace is, becoming a canonical author and only positivity and praise are given. With Wallace's untimely death, it is unclear in what ways he would continue and improve upon the democratic aesthetics of his work. Instead, readers are left with his work not to find closure but to keep open the possibilities of discussion, of interpretations, and of feelings.

### **Conclusion: The (Cruel) Impossibilities of Late Postmodernism**

"The remediated self is also evident in 'virtual communities on the Net, in which individuals stake out and occupy verbal and visual points of view through textual and graphic manifestation, but at the same time constitutes their collective identities as a network of affiliations among these mediated selves. The virtual community is the community as both subject and object of the process of remediation; it remediates the notion of community as defined in and through such earlier media as telegraph, telephone, radio, and TV."

- Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation*, 232

"[c]ommunication failure...does not mean we are lonely zombies searching for soul mates: it means we have new ways to relate and to make worlds with each other."

- John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 29

The intended formal failures of Wallace's work (and the failure of some of those formal intentions) illuminate the larger "impossibilities" of Late Postmodernism and the CMC imaginary, which resonates with Stein's impossibilities in her radio imaginary. These impossibilities and failures are not met with lamentation and despair by writers and readers since the 1990s but rather with hope or "cruel optimism" that engages with these impossibilities to keep them open so as to persistently invoke pluralities (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*). Together, the above quotes from Peters and Bolter and Grusin, both published in the 1999, capture the Late Postmodernist awareness and imaginary of impossibility and remediation that was developing since the early 1990s. Although enthusiastic rhetoric surrounded virtual or online communities, the failure of Barlow's and other cyberenthusiasts' dream to recapture a lost sense of community and democracy recognizes that we have new ways to relate and make worlds *with each other*. But these new ways *do not* regain something lost, they remediate the notions of communities that were defined in and through previous media. In particular, CMC remediated the notions of community when radio first emerged as a medium. Like the dreams of Marconi and Marinetti communicating "head and heart" without being weighed down by the "wires" of the body, cyberenthusiasts, writers, and academics were all drawn to a rhetoric of disembodiment in online spaces, and that disembodiment afforded "perfect communication" or what Peters calls the "dream of communication." But like Stein, Wallace is *wary* of this dream and *aware* of the impossibilities of communication in order to resist closure and determination of meaning, inviting the reader into the meaning-making process of the text.

At the center of the Late Postmodernist tensions between the "dream" of communication and the impossibility of communication lies the contesting notions of community: "paradise" lost and regained versus the remediation of "community." The "dream" that I have been drawing



attention to, both in the radio imaginary and in the CMC imaginary, alludes to a “natural” and utopian conception of a medium’s communication. But as Peters argues, the dream of communication overlooks and does not acknowledge the hard work that makes communication possible. Peters writes, “In renouncing the dream of ‘communication’ I am not saying that the urge to connect is bad; rather, I mean that dream itself inhibits the hard work of connection” (30). Rather than focusing on the dream of connection, Late Postmodernism is focused on the hard work of connection and the impossibility of completely connecting to others. The attempts at connecting, and the cruelty that sometimes results from it, is important, not only in Wallace’s work but also in the works of Lydia Davis, Lydia Millet, Martha Southgate, George Saunders, Colson Whitehead, and many more. Rheingold, too, although he leans towards the utopic, admits that “democracy” and “community” is not “natural” to technologies, especially CMC; rather, community and democracy is the result of the hard work of people, real life embodied people. Thus, Late Postmodernism demonstrates the urge to connect but also acknowledges and addresses the hard work of connection, the vulnerability and risk of communication. Without acknowledgement of that risk and vulnerability, the hard work of connection is inhibited; the “dream” of communication is often a solipsistic one or, like Marinetti’s vibrating “I” and Marconi’s authoritative sender, a fascist one, or like Barlow’s neoliberal “I,” a late-capitalist one. The “dream” of communication often does not acknowledge an other, because it removes any feeling of vulnerability or risk. In other words, dreamers’ heads are in the cloud.

The acknowledgement of the vulnerability and risk—the hard work—of communication is central to American sincerity. In Wallace’s work, there is an acknowledgement of an other, the reader, of writings’ mediation, and of the writer’s own perception of the world and how they differ from the reader’s. Resonating with Stein’s poetics (or, rather, repeating Stein but with a

difference), Wallace's work also seeks to be collaborative, dialogic, and embodied. But these poetics of Stein, which are oral/aural, are remediated into the medium of the written word. Rather than oral communication, the emphasis of Wallace and the CMC imaginary is written communication that still contains elements (the reciprocity and intimacy of dialogism) of oral communication. The engagement with intimacy and reciprocity of sincerity in a medium is meant to draw attention to the relationality of being, establishing a structure of "we" wherein individual identities are formed in relation to but not determined by others within the network. This structure conveys the feelings of community and democracy that these writers are drawn to. For Wallace and other Late Postmodernists, this structure is maintained by an impossibility of the dream of written communication. As Blanchot, Nancy, Agamben, and Esposito all argue, the impossibility of community and communication ensures community. Incompleteness is not a failure but an affordance of community and communication; it demands a continuous unworking and attention to the other. Late Postmodernism acknowledges the impossibility of community and of democracy but struggles with this impossibility if only to (re)connect.

But as Bolter and Grusin argue, the notion of self is also remediated by a medium; different media engage with and produce different notions of a self. Where the radio imaginary constitutes an orally/aurally defined self in relation to a network, the CMC imaginary constitutes a writerly defined self in relation to a network. As the next chapter demonstrates, readers of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* respond to the book by writing auto/biographically on a blog just as readers of Stein responded auto/biographically by the uniqueness of their voice. The self in the blog's setting is constituted by others in that network, establishing a networked self similar to the networked self of "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*." But the auto/biographical response to *Infinite Jest* is written rather than oral, and thus creates an intersubjective

engagement between the author('s text) and the reader for others to read and additionally respond to. Further, just as the sounding out of Stein's text in "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" creates a unique emphasis situated in the present, each blog post responding to *Infinite Jest* is situated in the present and places the unique experiences of readers at the forefront of the act of reading. Thus, the correlations I have been making between the internet and radio, and the notions of identity that emerge with these media, are similar but not the same; the CMC imaginary remediates the radio imaginary of the Modernist era.

As stated in the introduction of this chapter, the emerging CMC imaginary of this chapter's focus is primarily American, and thus deviates from the more cosmopolitan approach of Chapter 2. But the radio imaginaries of the modernist era were more or less clearly differentiated from one nation to another, and I positioned Stein in contesting these imaginaries in favour for an American sensibility that she shared with other American contemporaries. The American radio imaginary is not without its contradictions, as my chapter illuminated, but the emerging American CMC imaginary contains many of the tensions and differentiating imaginaries that radio had all across the world. And Wallace's work contains many of these contradictions, even when he attempts to contest these contradictions. Tensions among authority, paternalism, and embodiment are a site of struggle in American Late Postmodernism in a cultural, literary, and technological attempt to create a participatory culture of reciprocity and relationality between others. The struggles and failures with these tensions in Late Postmodernism, in general, and in Wallace's work, in particular, is indicative of the double bind of "cruel optimism": "even with an image of a better good life available to sustain your optimism, it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working" (Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 263). Despite the optimism of cyberenthusiasts and of Wallace, their

work also enacts moments of awkwardness and moments when those optimistic goals of community and democracy are threatened by the very same work of achieving that goal. But Late Postmodernism is characterized by adjustments, shifts, and corrections, sometimes awkward and sometimes in the wrong direction, by the authors or by the readers/participants that engage with the work. These adjustments and re-arrangements that negotiate with the impossibilities of communication share a common goal: the optimism of creating a dialogical relationship between others, and to make the reciprocal engagement *felt*, particularly in written communication.

## Chapter 5: (My) *Infinite Summer*

### Introduction: “Reading people write about IJ is more fun than reading the book”

This chapter now turns to the online reception and discussion of Wallace’s best known novel, *Infinite Jest*, in reading group blogs. In the most successful of these blogs, *Infinite Summer*, *Infinite Jest* “coaxes” auto/biographical writing, whether in relation to the novel in particular, to its themes of mental health and addiction, and/or to the very practice of reading (Smith and Watson *Reading* 64-5). To reiterate, I use “coaxing” or “coercing” to refer to the ways in which actors (people, places, things, etc) persuasively solicit or provoke people to tell/share auto/biographical disclosures and/or narratives. And I understand the coaxing in terms of a network, as Laurie McNeill puts it: “Members act as mutual ‘coaxers, coaches, and coercers’ (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 64) ensuring that the stories, and the network itself, continues” (74). McNeill is addressing Facebook, but I extend this concept of *mutual coaxing* to *Infinite Summer*. The mutual coaxing of *Infinite Summer* identifies the relationality of *Infinite Summer* between bloggers and commentators and the book that ensures the continued participation in the online reading group. The material affordances and constraints of the blog post and the comments “structure” these auto/biographical narratives in such a way to mutually coax others to write auto/biographically (Morrison, “Facebook and Coaxed Affordances” 117). I argue that the instances of auto/biographical writing in *Infinite Summer* are a “means of thinking” (Poletti “The Blog...” 266) through the novel and a “meaning-making process” (McNeill 80) in which bloggers narrate life narratives or disclosures to discuss the novel. To complement and contextualize my arguments about *Infinite Summer*, I also draw from my own online *Infinite Jest* reading group blog, *Poor Yoricks’ Summer*.<sup>41</sup> In these blogs, bloggers both identify and challenge the novel’s

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<sup>41</sup>. Poor Yorick refers to James Incandenza’s film company, Poor Yorick’s Entertainment, in *Infinite Jest*. The plural “Yoricks” is to refer to the guides and participants as Yorick.

representations, making a space for themselves in the book and in the reading group. These modes of auto/biographical thinking/telling, like the oral/aural automedia of “Everybody’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*,” establish an affective public in which a *feeling* of community and identity is felt by the participants (Papacharissi 129); the medium of the online reading group blog affords agency while also decentering the self to acknowledge the presence and relationality of others in the group. The feeling of community that I stress throughout this chapter emphasizes the role of affect in actualizing the community, and the ways participants are mutually coaxed to participate in the blog. The community of online *Infinite Jest* groups are more than imagined; they are actualized through the affectively charged participation in the materiality of the blog by writing blog posts and comments.

What produces *Infinite Summer’s* mutual coaxing of auto/biographical narratives is what I call the *affective relationality* of the blog. Affective relationality describes the accretion of relationality when auto/biographical writing *moves* (emotionally) other participants to respond with their own auto/biographical writing. The materiality of that blog concretizes affective relationality, affording participants the opportunity to respond and to have their responses visible and a part of the blog. The openness and vulnerability of these advocacy posts and of the following guide posts, in addition to the material affordances and constraints of the blog, form a relationality around the affective responses to reading and reading others writing about the novel. Papacharissi argues, “[t]he connective and expressive affordances thus generated grant a given technology its own mediality, and this mediality invites particular *forms* or *textures* of affective attunement” (*Affective Publics* 24; original emphasis). Thus, online *Infinite Jest* reading groups often affectively attune participants to write and engage with the novel auto/biographically.

Together, *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks' Summer* demonstrate the ways in which the “[a]utobiographical statements...[blend] public with private, and personal with political, to introduce affectively charged casual disruptions of stabilized cultural hierarchies” within American literature and within the group itself (Papacharissi 190). *Infinite Summer* builds a feeling of community through the inclusion of both affectively charged identification and critique, opening a democratic space of vulnerability through the invitation of multiple readings, opinions, and personal disclosures/narratives rather than limiting the group to one acceptable response or set of responses to the novel. In the previous chapter, I considered Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s claim that the Internet’s “many-to-many networks...can produce precisely the kinds of human relationship, the kinds of conversation, that Wallace’s vision of the novel meant to foster” (198). But, as I argued, there is a fallacy of inherency in this claim that the internet and the novel are inherently democratic. While I do agree, in part, with Fitzpatrick about *Infinite Summer*’s and my own blog’s efforts to be inclusive in discussions about Wallace’s novel, there is evidence of “hedging” or avoiding displeasing fans of *Infinite Jest* in both blogs. The auto/biographical writing that the novel coaxes, like the oral automedia that Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography* coaxes, does work towards an inclusivity and a democratic mode of reading and experiencing the book because it prompts readers to be vulnerable: to share their personal disclosures/narratives and to communicate their opinions. But auto/biographical narratives/disclosures of identification with *Infinite Jest* can often be uncritical in its extreme praise and admiration of the novel, thus preventing others from disclosing an auto/biographical admission of critique and dislike. Moreover, admissions of critique and dislike, informed by a personal disclosure or narrative, are sometimes frowned upon or received with defensive criticism from other members. As Austin Walker nicely puts it, but in the context of games:

“Fandom gives us so much. It can also turn us into defensive monsters” (n.p.). So, just as “Everybody’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*” demonstrated the tensions between oral/aural normativity (standardization) and plurality of Stein’s work and radio, *Infinite Summer* exhibits the tensions between online exclusivity and the affective drive of democratic feeling in Wallace’s work and online interactions. On one hand, Wallace’s novel invites auto/biographical narratives of addiction and mental health, encouraging identification amongst members of the blog; but, on the other hand, the novel invites critique, which is not always welcomed by members of the group, and thus threatens the group with normalizing discussions and excluding others.

The potential of inclusivity in *Infinite Jest* reading groups relies on the people participating in the online environment rather than the medium itself, just as Rheingold and Wallace argue in their approach to language and just as Stein relies on the reader’s participation in her (radio)texts. The auto/biographical participation in *Infinite Summer* allows for the reciprocity between text and readers and places this reciprocity in the foreground of discussions when reading the novel. More, autobiographical participation demands that others read or “listen” to these narratives, providing a relational experience of reading and understanding the novel and its arguments about the late postmodern world. I agree that *Infinite Summer*’s writing produces “modes of identification” that are “not just to the otherness of the text but also to the otherness of one another’s reading of those texts” (Fitzpatrick 199-200). But the writing in *Infinite Summer* goes beyond interpretation, beyond the kinds of interpretation and time-constrained discussion that may populate monthly book clubs or academic classrooms, because the discussions of *Infinite Summer* are framed and contextualized by autobiographical statements, disclosures, and narratives related to the themes of *Infinite Jest*. No other novel has



received annual (and recently bi-annual) blogs, and not too many literary blogs exhibit detailed auto/biographical disclosure/narratives in relation to a novel, never mind a group collective of auto/biographical narratives/disclosures. Thus, participants of *Infinite Summer* are additionally open to one another's otherness by interweaving their discussion of the novel with auto/biographical narratives or personal disclosures that accrete into a life narrative over the reading group's duration. *Infinite Summer* participants are, as Elizabeth Long writes of book club participants, "in the process of remaking themselves in dialogue with others and with literary texts" (Long 22). Just as Stein's democratic poetics invites a reciprocal remaking between text and reader, *Infinite Summer* demonstrates that Wallace's democratic aesthetics of vulnerability in *Infinite Jest* invite a reciprocal remaking between text, the self, and readers.

*Infinite Jest* is set in the near future when North America has been consolidated into one nation, the "Organization of North American Nations [O.N.A.N.]," under the coercion of the American government, whose president, Johnny Gentle, becomes the president of O.N.A.N. The plot that holds the novel together is that the American government and a Quebecois O.N.A.N.-separatist group, *Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants*, are searching for a film named "Infinite Jest," made by the late James Incandenza, that is *so entertaining* that viewers do not want to do anything else but watch the film, and thus die from neglecting their own body's needs. *Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants* want the film to distribute as a terrorist attack, and the American government wants the film to prohibit distribution and ensure their authority over the North American nations. The novel primarily takes place between the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.), founded by James Incandenza, and the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (sic). At the E.T.A., the novel follows the students and the Incandenza family: the mother, Avril, and the three sons, Orin, Hal, and Mario. At the Ennet House, the novel focuses on Don

Gately and other addicts. As the story progresses, the lives of the E.T.A. and the Ennet House are revealed to intersect with the plot involving the film “Infinite Jest” and its auteur. In sum, the novel is a critique of the American pursuit of happiness that prioritizes the individual, its rhetoric of disembodiment, the self-alienation it encourages, and the mental *and* physical damage it instills in American citizens. What draws readers to the novel is Wallace’s depictions of mental illness and addiction. These depictions coax a majority of readers to respond to and understand the novel through their own personal experiences with mental illness and/or addiction. But these depictions also inspire readers to share their experiences with others in order to escape the closed-off sense of individualism that many of *Infinite Jest*’s characters suffer from. As a result, online *Infinite Jest* reading groups, like *Infinite Summer*, bring these personal experiences to the foreground of writing about and understanding the novel, and this writing plays a significant role in forming the communities in online *Infinite Jest* reading groups.

*Infinite Summer* took place during the summer of 2009; it was announced on May 23 and ran between June 23 and September 22. The online reading group’s goal was to facilitate a group reading of Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* according to a schedule that partitioned the book into weekly chunks. *Infinite Summer* attracted a lot of attention, partly because of Wallace’s recent death, in September 2008, and partly because of the bloggers’ social and media connections. The blog was a big success, gathering at least 1100 participants (this number is based on the members of the Forum’s page and does not take into account participants who simply read along). *Infinite Summer* has spurred annual (and sometimes semi-annual) online *Infinite Jest* reading groups on blogs, Facebook groups, and Reddit subreddits. *Infinite Summer* was curated by Matthew Baldwin and consisted of four “guides.” The guides were Baldwin, author Kevin Guilfoile, blogger Eden Kennedy, and comedian Avery Edison. The role of guides in online reading groups

is to blog on an assigned day each week in order to encourage and motivate participants to keep reading, as well as to facilitate discussion of the novel in the comments, which are immediately visible below the post. The numbers of comments range from 1 to 129, with the average number of comments ranging between 20 and 40 per week. The blogger's engagement with the comments were minimal, replying to a couple or one comment in the blog post, but bloggers would typically "respond" to the comments in the subsequent blog post. *Infinite Summer* also featured guest bloggers, a weekly "Elsewhere Jest" "Roundup" post that synthesized discussions made across blogs in the *Infinite Summer* blogroll and any news related to *Infinite Summer* and/or *Infinite Jest*, and a weekly "Infinite Summary" post that would summarize the events of the respective week's reading. On the left side of blog on every page (see Fig 1), there is a directory that includes weekly archives, the last ten comments, the last ten blog posts, and the blog's Categories; but also, the blogroll's blogs and links to those blogs, the guides, and the editor Linda Mitchell.

[2009](#) (7)

[August 17, 2009–August 23, 2009](#)

[August 17, 2009–August 23, 2009](#) (7)

[August 10, 2009–August 16, 2009](#) (7)

[August 3, 2009–August 9, 2009](#) (7)

[July 27, 2009–August 2, 2009](#) (7)

[July 20, 2009–July 26, 2009](#) (7)

[July 13, 2009–July 19, 2009](#) (7)

[July 6, 2009–July 12, 2009](#) (7)

[June 29, 2009–July 5, 2009](#) (7)

[June 22, 2009–June 28, 2009](#) (7)

[June 15, 2009–June 21, 2009](#) (6)

[June 8, 2009–June 14, 2009](#) (4)

[June 1, 2009–June 7, 2009](#) (4)

## THE CATEGORIES

[Countdown](#) (12)

[Advocacy](#) (3)

[Preparation](#) (3)

[Elsewhere Jest](#) (10)

[Guests](#) (23)

[Guides](#) (61)

[Avery Edison](#) (15)

[Eden M. Kennedy](#) (15)

[Kevin Guilfoile](#) (15)

[Matthew Baldwin](#) (17)

[Miscellaneous](#) (8)

[Rountables](#) (9)

[Summaries](#) (11)

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## THE COPYRIGHT

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Website design by [Upstart Blogger](#).

[Facebook](#)

## THE GUIDES

[Matthew Baldwin](#)

[Eden M. Kennedy](#)

[Kevin Guilfoile](#)

[Avery Edison](#)

## THE EDITOR

[Linda Mitchell](#)

## THE FEEDS

[Entries \(RSS\)](#)

[Comments \(RSS\)](#)



## THE BLOGROLL

- [Infinite Zombies](#)
- [Infinite Detox](#)
- [A Supposed Fun Blog](#)
- [Infinite Tasks](#)
- [Gerry Canavan](#)
- [I Just Read About That](#)
- [Love, Your Copyeditor](#)
- [Sarah's Books](#)
- [The Feminist Texican](#)
- [Conversational Reading](#)
- [Journeyman](#)
- [Repat Blues](#)
- [Chris Forster](#)
- [Brain Hammer](#)
- [Naptime Writing](#)
- [Infinite Jestation](#)

(Fig 1. *Infinite Summer*'s directory sidebar. Retrieved July 2, 2018).

The organization and the materiality of the *Infinite Summer* blog affords the affective public's feeling of community, which feelings are further fostered by the inclusion of a variety of auto/biographical practices on the blog. As Aimée Morrison argues, the blog "as a writing form is fundamentally about fostering personal expression, meaningful conversation, and collaborative thinking" ("Blogs and Blogging" 369). Moreover, she adds that blogrolls "foster community and conversation in their function as aggregators of bloggers and readers, and of topics, viewpoints, and references" (372). The material layout of *Infinite Summer* that includes the blogroll of participating blogs, recent comments, the guides, and making visible the editor, Linda Mitchell, foregrounds the communal work of the blog; the site establishes that it is an aggregation of bloggers, commentators, editors, and readers. And, with the exception of the "Infinite Summary" posts, auto/biography plays a central role in fostering that feeling of community *and* in thinking through the text, meaning-making, critiquing the text, and connecting with other readers participating in the group. These online narratives or personal disclosures are fragmentary or "episodic" in contrast to traditional print auto/biographies, a form that is coerced by *Infinite Summer*'s weekly reading and posting schedule (Smith and Watson, "Virtually Me" 90). The accretion of these episodic individual narratives, in conversation with one another, develop a grand, overarching narrative specific to the blog. The blog establishes participants' identities in these reading groups as fundamentally relational; it becomes a site for the co-construction of an online auto/biography in which its narratives come together to share various perspectives on the novel.

In this chapter, I situate the forms of auto/biographical expression that elicit feelings of community in *Infinite Summer* into two interdependent categories: 1) *Affirmational auto/biography*: auto/biographical writing that identifies with *Infinite Jest*, containing

discussions about mental health, addiction, and the anxiety and stress of everyday life. Additionally, affirmational auto/biography refers to the very practice of reading the novel, with participants referring to the schedule in their attempts to keep up with it to affirm the feeling of community that this communal act of reading a book elicits. 2) *Oppositional auto/biography*: auto/biographical writing that challenges and/or is unable to identify with the novel, containing discussions about disliking the novel, poor representations of race and gender in the novel, and attempts to decenter Wallace and his intentions. “Oppositional auto/biography” operates in a similar manner to “resisting interpretation” in reader response criticism, in which readers resist “interpretations presented as normative, meshing their reading with other social practices and semiotic domains” (Lang 2); however, in oppositional auto/biographies, those domains also include and prioritize the personal. Where I used “automedial” in Chapter 3 to analyze the orality/aurality of participants, I have decided to use “auto/biography” in this chapter because participants only write. However, I still would like to keep in mind “automedial” in order to address the materiality of the blog and to acknowledge the *process* and *product* of writing the self on the blog because of the accretion of person details and disclosures into (co-constructed) narratives. In *Infinite Summer*, the interplay between affirmational and oppositional auto/biographical expression contributes to the feeling of community because the vulnerable space of identifying and challenging the novel affords open discussion about the book rather than one shared interpretation of *Infinite Jest*.

Throughout this chapter, I draw from my own online *Infinite Jest* reading group, *Poor Yoricks’ Summer*, to further support my claims about *Infinite Summer* while also adding an understanding of the moderation and participation in an *Infinite Jest* reading group. *Poor*

*Yoricks' Summer* was small in comparison to *Infinite Summer*, gathering more “lurkers”<sup>42</sup> than participants that commented. But *Poor Yoricks' Summer* received 466 comments, over 10,000 views, and 3,000 visitors in total (though I cannot confirm that all of these visitors were not bots). The twitter account had 161 followers, some of whom frequently tweeted back, or direct messaged me to express their enjoyment of the blog posts, or retweeted the account’s tweets. I curated *Poor Yoricks' Summer* because I wanted to experience the affect of reading *Infinite Jest* online with others and illuminate why *Infinite Summer* and other online *Infinite Jest* reading groups contained so much auto/biographical writing. Was it just Wallace’s novel that coaxed these auto/biographical disclosures/narratives, and why? Or did the medium of the blog mainly contribute to those auto/biographies? Does the combination of both the novel and blog format, as Fitzpatrick hints at, produce this auto/biographical writing? And how crucial is auto/biography to the feeling or formation of community in these groups? My answers to these questions are throughout this chapter, and *Poor Yoricks' Summer* significantly confirmed my critical hunches. Indeed, the medium of the blog and the novel coaxes auto/biographical writing, but it is the novel that *contextualizes* those auto/biographical writings and the feelings of community. Moreover, the autobiographical writings that accrete over the duration of the reading group further contribute to the feeling of community or lead to actual communities that exist outside of the blog. While blogging and reading *Infinite Jest* on *Poor Yoricks' Summer*, it certainly felt like we were a small community that was part of a larger community of *Infinite Jest* reading groups and Wallace fans.

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<sup>42</sup>. Just before the beginning of *Poor Yoricks' Summer*, another successful *Infinite Jest* online reading group, *Infinite Winter*, had just been held, concluding in the first week of a May, a month before *PYS* began. As a result, a lot of people who participated in *Infinite Winter* did not want to participate in *PYS* but still read the blog posts.

The guides of *Poor Yoricks' Summer* were Allie Fournier (a Program and Communications Coordinator in New Brunswick), Joe Deluca (a rehabilitation support worker/therapist in Southern Ontario), Shazia Hafiz Ramji (a poetry editor and MFA student in British Columbia), and myself. Deluca and Fournier are friends of mine, and Ramji had responded to my request for a “guide” on the Wallace-I listserv. Whereas *Infinite Summer's* guides all had not read *Infinite Jest*, Fournier was the only one who had not read the novel. This is a current trend in subsequent online *Infinite Jest* reading groups, wherein the majority of the guides have already read the book. In some cases (like *Infinite Winter*), participants of *Infinite Summer* have gone on and facilitated or guided their own online *Infinite Jest* reading group. The continued facilitation of these reading groups and reoccurring participants certainly contribute to actual communities forming. In fact, the attention that *Poor Yoricks' Summer* got was largely in debt to the communities of the guides and the Wallace communities online. *Poor Yoricks' Summer* featured a very similar schedule to *Infinite Summer*, as well as guest bloggers, and I am pleased that gender parity was achieved. The blog did not include an “Infinite Summary” or “Roundup” primarily because of the demanding work that moderating the blog, writing weekly blog posts, gathering guest bloggers, and reading the novel according to the schedule requires. Also unlike *Infinite Summer*, the guides of *Poor Yoricks' Summer* responded frequently to the few comments the blog posts received, engaging in full discussions and sometimes heated but respectful debate. (Disclaimer: I only refer to the guides' posts and comments and one guest post and her comments because I do not have ethics clearance for the participants and other guests. I only have ethics clearance for the guides and Clare Hayes-Brady's blog post/comments).

My attention to auto/biography in *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks' Summer* is, of course, a means of connecting to “Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*” and the ways



automedias in that project afford participants to enter and change the text; but my attention to auto/biography in these online reading groups is also significant in relation to book clubs. In studies of book clubs and “Mass Reading Events,” or MREs, the auto/biographical is usually discussed in the context of personal reading (Fuller and Sedo). Jim Collins explains personal reading “in the sense that books take on value only when they are introjected into the lives of readers” (44). Other studies prescribe reading as a “form of self-cultivation” (Collins on Oprah’s Book Club 102), “reflective self-fashioning” (Long 223), “personal and passionate” (Bloom 4), a “social and political act performed by embodied individuals” (Fuller and Sedo 41), and as “an individual, deeply personal reaction or response to the textually embodied particularities of others” (Radway 43-44). Although Collins’ writes *when*, reading *is* often introjected in the lives of a reader, informed by readers’ lives, and *is* a means of self-cultivation. As Marielle Macé argues, “Reading is not a separate activity, functioning in competition with life, but one of the daily means by which we give our existence form, flavor, and even style” (213). Reading, responding, and reacting to a book includes a variety of auto/biographical practices. But when reading a book and blogging about the responses and reactions, the auto/biographical becomes more apparent and at the foreground of the reading experience for both the individual reading the book and for others reading along in the group blog.

Studies of MREs like Oprah’s Book Club, Canada Reads, OBOCs (One Book One Community), Book-Of-The-Month Club, and other book clubs mostly focus on the organization, rhetoric, and presentation of books within these MREs and the arguments about identity (typically national) that they make. Although some of these studies contain ethnographic research about readers, documenting their discussions and responses to the researchers’ questions, any writing these readers do, off- or on-line, is often overlooked. In a lot of cases, this

is because not all readers in reading groups are required to write, withholding their thoughts for discussion at meetings; yet, online components of MREs are spaces rich in readers' written discussions in which identities are negotiated between book, the ideology of the MRE, and others participating in that MRE. My critical approach to these discussions in *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks' Summer*, then, is descriptive because 1) these writings are often overlooked and/or seen as critically uninteresting, and 2) descriptive criticism allows for a more attentive and ethical engagement in ethnographic studies of the internet. As Heather Love argues, "by focusing exclusively on meaning, intention, language, and culture, critics have not attended fully to the behavioral components of experience and representation" (404). Thus, throughout my analysis of online *Infinite Jest* reading groups, I "defer[] virtuosic interpretation in order to attempt to formulate an accurate account of what the [blog posts and comments are] like...[and] highlight[ the blog's] capacity to index and make visible forms of material and social reality (Love 412). The statements and conclusions I make throughout this paper may appear obvious, but that's because I make it obvious: I make visible the forms of material and social reality of online *Infinite Jest* groups, demonstrating "the complex links between texts and social worlds" (Love 412).<sup>43</sup>

Participation in an MRE is a pursuit of a literary ethos that is integrally tied to the individual's sense of who they are. And participants' writing is a means of presenting that self in relation to others, while also being a process of negotiating with others; writing in an online MRE is a public means of working towards a community while preserving a sense of an identity

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<sup>43</sup>. I am also inspired by and recommend Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*. Felski argues, "Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible" (12). Influenced by new French criticism, such as Bruno Latour, Marielle Macé, and Yves Citton, Felski encourages scholars to think of reading "as a coproduction between actors rather than an unraveling of manifest meaning, a form of making rather than unmaking."

in relation to that community. And that MRE, like *Infinite Summer*, provides a context in which that feeling of identity and community are framed and produced. Marielle Macé argues, “Every literary configuration thus directs us to a kind of path to follow, a “phrasing” in the existent world” (216). She, thus, considers reading “as a conduct, a behavior rather than a decoding” that is a “decisive moment in the construction of a ‘grammar of relationship to the self’ and to others” (218). Writing on the methods of netnography and online communities, Roger Kozinets points out that “the more central this activity [is] to a person’s sense of identity, and the more they believe the pursuit and development of the skill or activity is central to their self-image and core self-concept, then the more likely this person is to pursue and value membership in a community” (31-2). For *Infinite Jest* reading groups, joining the group is part motivation for reading a 1000+ page book, part desire to discuss the novel with someone else, and part being drawn to its depiction of mental health and addiction. Whatever the personal interest in participating, the book provides context and conduct for how participants present themselves to others in the group. The interaction between book and self, and self and others shape the feeling of community within the blog. In other words, each MRE may provide a contextual framework, but the interactions of the MRE produce affective intensities that may also contribute to the discussions. And given the “episodic” affordance of the blog that allows for multiple posts to be made over a duration of time, individual bloggers and commentators do not simply present a 2-dimensional version of their identity: they write *both* affirmational *and* oppositional auto/biographical genres. Each blog post is a “means of creating scenes for [the guides and the participants] to encounter others” (Poletti, “The Blog as Experimental Setting” 265), in which a scene is a space that can afford an encounter between self and others. Each “scene” in *Infinite Summer* either expresses affirmational identification or oppositional identification, and the

following comments, other blogs linked in the comments, and blog posts that refer to that particular blog post are “encounters” with that expression. These encounters can also be affirmational or oppositional, contributing to the scene’s discussions by either identifying with the blog post or not and build toward a sense of community.

At its outset *Infinite Summer* establishes a rhetorical precedent that emphasizes the auto/biographical as a mode of thinking and discussing *Infinite Jest*. The majority of the posts across the fourteen weeks of *Infinite Summer* are framed by an auto/biographical narrative that then leads into an understanding of a section of the novel; or, a scene or quote from the novel may prompt or coax an auto/biographical narrative. And while the novel may coax these auto/biographical narratives out of the guides, their posts tend to (but not always) coax participants to comment on their own life experiences in relation to the blog post. The interplay between these posts and comments reveal the online co-construction of relational auto/biographies that are built around an empathetic connection when reading the novel together. Rather than just an online forum to discuss a book, *Infinite Summer* is also an auto/biographical site wherein auto/biographies are produced in relation to the novel and between readers, thereby creating a feeling of community. These interactions in *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* contextualize and ground the novel’s narratives in the lives of readers, providing alternative narratives/experiences that, for some, are better than the novel’s. As one participant of *Infinite Summer* writes, “Reading people write about IJ is more fun than reading the book for me” (Henderson n.p.). What is “more fun” is that the auto/biographical details, disclosures, and narratives that participants and guides share decenter the authorial presence of the author and novel, providing a variety of life experiences that connect to the novel or that the novel

overlooks, and embodying *and* contesting the novel's themes and representations in the lives of readers.

### **The Auto/biographical Precedent of *Infinite Summer***

*Infinite Summer* contains as much auto/biography as it does because its "Advocacy" posts that promoted the group and recruited members establish a rhetorical precedent for the blog that coaxes auto/biographical expression. These "Advocacy" posts coax future commenters and bloggers posts to write autobiographically. Before *Infinite Summer* commenced reading the book, Baldwin selected guests with some kind of public presence to promote *Infinite Summer* and advocate why people should join the group and read *Infinite Jest*. These guests were the musician Colin Meloy, blogger Mimi Smartypants, and the Wallace-I listserv administrator Matt Bucher. Each of these guests begin their advocacy post with an auto/biographical story involving their first read or attempt at reading *Infinite Jest*. And because they framed their attachments to and admiration for *Infinite Jest* auto/biographically, those who are drawn into *Infinite Summer* by these posts, or even those who are already following the blog, will approach the novel auto/biographically as well. The advocacy bloggers present reading *Infinite Jest* as personal, which stand in contrast to other reading groups or book clubs that read a book and discuss its merits (a more evaluative approach). Thus, the advocacy posts prompt participants to think through and make meaning of *Infinite Jest* auto/biographically; these posts argue that *Infinite Jest*, unlike other books, demand a more personal and intimate reading of the novel.

The acts of auto/biography in these advocacy posts share a vulnerability with (prospective) participants and thereby begin to cultivate a feeling of community on the blog. In Meloy's and Bucher's posts, they emphasize the first and subsequent attempts to read the novel in order to connect with others who also have struggled with the novel and left it unfinished,

implying that the book is better read with others. Meloy begins his post with “I think I bought my copy of *Infinite Jest* in 1997. To be honest, I don’t know what inspired the purchase” (“Why I am Reading Infinite Jest” n.p.). He narrates that he had been strapped for cash at that time, sharing that he had been working at a coffee shop and “lived mostly on the terrible tips from that coffee shop.” Forgetting why he purchased the book, he also vaguely recalls his failed attempt at reading the book.: “I seem to remember picking up *Infinite Jest* with excitement and gusto and ambition and ... boom, stopped on the 100th page or so.” Bucher similarly begins his post with “I first saw the novel in the window at the old Tattered Cover in Cherry Creek, Denver,” and also notes that “[m]y first attempt at reading the book sputtered out about 300 pages in. Classes got in the way” (“Why Read Infinite Jest?” n.p.). These blog posts tell the story of “life getting in the way.” Meloy notes economic constraints and life conditions that, understandably, did not make reading a thousand page novel feasible. And yet he notes that “[p]ulling [the novel] off the shelf” reminded him of that time, which suggests that the novel itself, even unread, coaxes the specific life narrative he shares in his blog post. Bucher also notes undergraduate economic constraints, admitting that he only picked up *Infinite Jest* when the paperback went down to \$8.99 because he was a “bargain shopper” (n.p.) But still, undergraduate life got in the way, for Bucher. As a rhetorical gesture, the auto/biographical focus on the attempts to read *Infinite Jest* persuades potential participants that this will be a newcomer-friendly reading group; that everyone there, even those who have read *Infinite Jest* (like Bucher), struggled reading the novel because life. Simultaneously, these narratives also tell of a personal connection to a book unread, implying that *Infinite Jest* has a tendency to have a role in some life narrative or another, thereby fostering auto/biographical thinking even before the book is being read. Indeed, anyone can take a book off of a shelf and tell an auto/biographical narrative behind it, but these advocacy posts

significantly present *Infinite Jest*, in their promotion of the group reading the book, as a very personal and intimate book that will provoke auto/biographical thinking and play a significant role in one's life.<sup>44</sup>

Instead of relating her struggles reading the book, Mimi Smartypants acts as an authority or expert on *Infinite Jest* and its postmodern context (her biographical description notes that she has read the book “thrice”). But this “authority” is presented as having been established by her “extreme love” for the book rather than an intellectual mastery over it. And she humorously relates various scenarios that showcase her extreme love for the book, such as cornering someone to express her love of *Infinite Jest*. The authority that Mimi Smartypants displays is rooted in her sense of self; she unapologetically describes herself as a “literary wanker” and uses this identity or “status” to argue that Wallace is “enjoyable in a way that [John] Barth and [Thomas] Pynchon are not” (“Why Read Infinite Jest?” n.p.). She singles out *Infinite Jest* from these authors (who are typically associated with Wallace in the novel's paratextual reviews) to argue that the novel is “so much fun” and has “humanity in it” whereas the other authors lack these qualities. Mimi Smartypants emphasizes the personal enjoyment and connection the book will elicit, foregrounding the personal in a different light than the other advocacy posts. Mimi Smartypants characterizes the novel as being connected to the social world and as a means of self-discovery because of this connection and because of the “humanity” that she promises is in the novel.

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<sup>44</sup>. For her book club selections, Oprah sometimes frames her choices auto/biographically: how the book affects her and how it relates to her life. And she presents her books as “therapeutic” for her readers, and thus having a significant influence in their lives (See Collins). But other MREs, such as Canada Reads, usually present selections according to certain themes connected to the ideology or national identity of the MRE. In short, the majority of MREs and the promotion of their selections is thematic rather than auto/biographical.

In contrast to Meloy's and Bucher's posts that emphasize the struggle that is felt by all who read *Infinite Jest*, Mimi Smartypants' post emphasizes the book as enjoyable and inviting. Mimi Smartypants' post makes *Infinite Jest* less intimidating, as Meloy and Bucher do, but she de-emphasizes any kind of struggle that may be associated with the novel. She sets out to dissociate *Infinite Jest* from the common conception (or perception) of postmodern fiction: "Of course, by this point I know what to expect of my postmodern fiction, right? Lots of little literary in-jokes and poking playful fun at the search for meaning, a big textual circle jerk that allows me to admire the author's chops while also smirking proudly about how smart I am for getting it. That's not at all how reading *Infinite Jest* is" (Mimi Smartypants n.p.). Mimi Smartypants undermines notions about reading a long (post)modernist novel and *Infinite Jest* as a masculinist endeavor. Rather than value the intellectual rigour of reading *Infinite Jest*, Mimi Smartypants values the *feelings* of reading *Infinite Jest*. "*Infinite Jest* feels very real," she writes, establishing the novel as an affective experience that connects to the social world and the reader's life in that world. By doing so, Mimi Smartypants invites readers into the group who may have been intimidated by the masculinist struggle and intellectual rigour associated with *Infinite Jest* or by the connotation of reading *Infinite Jest* as a challenge that *Infinite Summer* suggests by its first post. Instead, she points to the feelings, the enjoyment, and the involvement of the novel in one's life.

These advocacy posts significantly shape *Infinite Summer* towards auto/biographical thinking as a primary means of reading, understanding, and approaching *Infinite Jest*. By sharing their struggles with and/or love of reading *Infinite Jest*, these posts coax participants into sharing their struggles and encourage people who have struggled reading the book to participate.



Furthermore, Mimi Smartypants complements Meloy's and Bucher's auto/biographical sharing by arguing that this is what the book coaxes readers to produce. She writes,

*Infinite Jest* feels very real, with the underlying premise that we MUST read, write, or talk ourselves out of the metafictional spiral; that it is actually urgent that we connect with the world, not hide from it with drink or drugs or television or literary skill...A novel about the absolute necessity of conveying our subjective consciousness to each other, that in fact IS an attempt to convey subjective consciousness to you, the reader—this feels like such a relief after decades of novels that laughingly deny the possibility. (“Why Read *Infinite Jest*?” n.p.)

Mimi Smartypants argues that *Infinite Jest* is about the utmost importance of communication between others rather than the impossibility of that communication. As indicated by the “we,” she suggests that the novel demands that the online reading group write themselves out of a “metafictional spiral” during the summer. In other words, she encourages discussion that is not simply about the novel itself but also about the world in which the readers live in; she suggests that bloggers and commentators should be open, honest, and connect with each other by conveying their “subjective consciousness to each other.” Thus, a precedent is established amongst participants in *Infinite Summer* to read, write, and talk beyond the novel by putting their real experiences at the forefront of the blog's discussions.

Mimi Smartypants's argument about the novel recalls Wallace's rhetorical argument about fiction's purpose in “E Unibus Pluram,” but it also echoes *Infinite Jest*'s meta-commentary on what is missing in American literature and in discussions of American literature. At the midpoint of the novel, the narration follows Mario Incandenza listening to Madame Psychosis's

radio show, “Sixty Minutes +/- with Madame Psychosis.” The narrator notes that what Mario likes about Madame Psychosis’s radio show is that it felt like

he was listening to someone sad read out loud from yellow letters she’d taken out of a showbox on a rainy P.M., stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, stuff that was real. It is increasingly hard to find valid art that is about the stuff that is real in this way. The older Mario gets, the more confused he gets about the fact that everyone at E.T.A. over the age of about Kent Blott finds stuff that’s really real uncomfortable and they get embarrassed. It’s like there’s some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn’t happy. (592)

Mario’s dissatisfaction with his peers’ and his family’s avoidance of “real stuff” reflects his continued attempts throughout the novel to get others to open up to him, while also pointing, in an extra-fictional move by Wallace, to the “U.S. woe” of drug addiction and mental illness that the novel is attempting to cover. The problem that Mario encounters (and the problem that Wallace finds in his contemporaries’ literature) is others’ fear of vulnerability, deflecting and distancing themselves by rolling their eyes and laughing it off or simply reverting to dismissal. Rather than open up to Mario and his inquiries, they close themselves off; rather than discuss “real stuff,” they deflect and trivialize it.

Mimi Smartypants’ advocacy for connecting the novel “with the world” urges participants to discuss the “real stuff” that Mario finds amiss in everyday conversations. Her post urges participants to probe the novel’s connection to the world and the participant’s self. Moreover, when readers come across passages in the novel, such as the one above, with Mimi Smartypants’ comments in mind, the reader is encouraged to reflect on the novel’s connection to

the self and the world and to think auto/biographically. As a result, auto/biography in these and subsequent posts are context-expanding gestures, giving context to the novel as well as situating (personal) context for readers to easily approach and come to the novel with. To elaborate: the context these Advocacy posts provide is primarily *not* historical, cultural, or literary context; instead, these posts provide a personal, auto/biographical context or conduct for understanding and approaching the novel's historical, cultural, and/or literary context. These personal contexts may include literary context, as Mimi Smartypants' post does, but this context is always framed by auto/biography. Thus, the advocacy posts coax participants and the guides to be or consider the possibility of being open and honest about the book by thinking through it auto/biographically. *Infinite Summer's* rhetorical precedent of auto/biography within the advocacy posts invites the particular form that affectively attunes participants and bloggers towards auto/biographical expression and the mutual coaxing of these auto/biographical expressions. This affective form is similar to past book clubs, in which "reading [is] completely suffused by feeling and affect; it [is] an experience of reply, response, and reaction" (Radway 33). But the experience of reply, response, and reaction is foregrounded and concretized by the structure of the blog and coaxed into a co-construction of auto/biographical narratives.

### **Affirmational Auto/biographies: Identifying with (reading) *Infinite Jest***

Affirmational auto/biographies in *Infinite Summer* are life writing acts that identify with *Infinite Jest* (characters, themes, events), with Wallace, and with each other's struggles with reading the novel over the summer. I am using the fan studies term "affirmational" instead of "accepting" (Lang 2) because the majority of affirmational autobiographies tend to be or become fans of Wallace's work, and the writings move beyond "accepting interpretations" (Lang 2). "Affirmational" describes fan practices in which "the source material is re-stated, the author's

purpose divined to the community's satisfaction” (obsession\_inc n.p.). In *Infinite Summer*, affirmational auto/biographies re-state *Infinite Jest* and/or any other work by Wallace in order to tell a story about the self; they praise Wallace’s talent as an author because of the accuracy with which Wallace captures their feelings or depicts a similar life experience of the reader’s. These life experiences typically involve mental illness or addiction. Additionally, participants in *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* often re-state the reading schedule by referring to where they are in the book, whether they have gotten behind or are keeping themselves from going ahead of schedule. This meta-commentary by the participants on their reading practices affirms and re-affirms the communal work of the reading group that becomes integral to the understanding of the novel. This affirmation of the reading group schedule motivates others to remain with the group and causes those who have fallen behind to feel included. These auto/biographies mutually coax others in sharing life narratives or disclosures that identify with the novel and with the reading group, using their identification with the novel to make meaning out of the text and out of their struggles with mental illness and/or addiction and finding time to read. Altogether, these affirmational auto/biographies facilitate the feeling of community in the group: they invite the sharing of vulnerable narratives of mental health, addiction, and/or falling behind (which is associated with not being a “good reader”).

Affirmational encounters that discuss the *reading of Infinite Jest* are a meta-discourse that runs throughout the entirety of *Infinite Summer* and in *Poor Yoricks’ Summer*. Posts and comments that comment upon their reading restate and reinforce the *Infinite Summer* reading schedule and the purpose of the online reading group, creating a feeling of community by sharing reading habits, practices, and strategies. Eden Kennedy writes in her second post,

how the fuck are you people finding time to read? Do none of you have jobs? Certainly you don't have families, or children belonging to an age group that is defined by its inability to successfully manipulate a fresh band-aid. Too many people need me for too many things, and I suddenly see why it's all I can do to throw up a blog post and then run screaming to put out another dryer lint fire, or keep a neglected dog from peeing In [sic] someone's shoe, or sadly buttoning up another unironed shirt as I dash out the door to a job where a minor office sport is trying to guess how old I am. ("Breathing into a paper bag" n.p.)

Kennedy continues the trend begun by the advocacy posts of relating the struggles with finding time to read *Infinite Jest*, or in general, without life getting in the way. Kennedy shares her daily life and its interruptions that not only disrupt her reading but also her blogging about the book. The affective intensity of reading the book coaxes Kennedy to share aspects of her life with participants: her role as a mother, the approximate age of her children, her dog's antics, and her workplace environment. The disclosure of this kind of information, which other guests and guides also provide, is an act of vulnerability; it is a risk that endangers her credibility as a "guide" while also reaching out to and inviting others who share her similar struggle of finding time to read.

Kennedy's question about how participants are finding time to read was meant to be a "fundamentally rhetorical" one ("The Trick Is Keeping the Truth Up-Front" n.p.). But many people responded and contributed to the discussion of "how the fuck" they are finding time to read, creating a forum in which to discuss strategies for sticking to the schedule. These comments form relational auto/biographies that share how to manage reading with the demands of everyday life, and parenting in particular. kayare writes, "I'm only managing to read before

bed. Since my 10 month old goes down by 7:30...Sadly, if I were to entirely devote myself to reading that early, my marriage would probably suffer. I have been going to bed roughly half an hour earlier (and leaving the dirty dishes 'til morning) to stay mostly on track” (“Breathing into a paper bag” n.p.). naptimewriting concurs, “I second (and third) a lot of the voices above on sneaking in reading after kid goes to bed, before kid awakes, and instead of T.V” (n.p.) Because Kennedy referred to her family, the age of her children, and her responsibilities as a parent/adult, participants are coaxed to open up and share their responsibilities as a parent, the ages of their kids, and the time they put their kids to bed as an ideal time to read. Others share how they balance reading with their romantic relationships and how they re-prioritize their roles, such as doing dishes, to make time for their families and for reading. Kennedy’s comment, originally made in jest, coaxed a range of comments that created a support network of reading strategies for participants who were parents, but mothers in particular. In doing so, these auto/biographical narratives reinforce the goal of *Infinite Summer* to read the book together, which involves helping each other read through the book by writing (and reflecting) on their lives; the group became an inclusive space for those with parenting responsibilities or for those whose jobs are demanding, acknowledging that “life gets in the way” and that these participants have a life, a life which is worth sharing on the blog.

These auto/biographical snippets about reading practices and progress reinforce the schedule of the reading group while also acknowledging the difficulties of keeping up. In *Poor Yoricks’ Summer*, when Ramji isn’t able to write a post one week, she writes the following week, “I’m just going to get this out of the way first: Sorry I missed my post last week; my lover broke his collarbone and all hell was revealed in increments” (“The Wraith and Hal...” n.p.). Another week, Deluca notes that “It was a photo finish in keeping with the schedule this week, but I’m

happy to announce that I'm fully up to date and ready to go another brief round here on the webs (no spiders in sight though, so not to worry) with all you wonderful cats" ("Oh, do not ask..." n.p.). Even Fournier took a time to write a sonnet because she missed reading that week's reading ("An Apologetic Sonnet" n.p.). These posts include a mixture of humour (the sonnet), references to the novel (spiders), and the fact that life gets in the way (lover's broken collarbone). The narratives communicate that the guides have lives outside of the reading group, that reading a large novel is difficult to manage, and thus conveying the feeling that "we're all in this together." Without these admissions of catching up and apologies for missing a blog post, the guides would convey a kind of elitism or expertise that might shame people who have fallen behind. This kind of writing is, as Mimi Smartypants puts it, a means of writing outside of the novel and making their lives public to connect with others. In Kennedy's follow up post to "Breathing into a Paper Bag," she is floored by the number of responses and thanks participants, acknowledging the intimacy that is formed by her personal disclosures. ("The Trick..." n.p.). By referring to the schedule but also admitting that they are not as faithful to it as they should be as "guides," the guides create an environment in which openly stating where you are in the schedule and why (the "why" containing a life narrative) is acceptable and encouraged.<sup>45</sup> The positive response to what may be perceived as a "failure"—failure to keep up with reading the book according to the schedule—encourages "fruitful social interaction" and the "extension of their online relationships" (Morrison, "Compositional Strategies..." 286). The schedule is thus presented as something that gives "structure" but does not dictate reading practices; rather, the structure of the schedule coaxes guides and participants to disclose their reading practices, thereby forming an intimate relationship between guides and participants.

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<sup>45</sup> The young adult author John Green titles his post "Why I'm behind," yet the majority of his post concerns his career as a young adult novelist, and why many scenes from *Infinite Jest* informed his writing.

The intimacy of sharing their writing and reading of *Infinite Jest* creates the feeling of community between guides and participants and it works towards inclusivity within the group but does not guarantee it. The sharing of each other's' writing is what Nancy calls *literary communism*, which he defines as “the sharing of community in and by its writing, its literature” (26). In *Infinite Summer*, community is shared or communicated because of the vulnerability individuals express in narrating their progress and reading practices; this vulnerability establishes the relationality of the online reading group. As a result of the provision and validation of various approaches to reading, these comments encourage a democratic mode of reading, a mode of reading informed by the reader's relational self that encourages (being open to) various reading practices, interpretations, and reactions. Just as Stein's democratic approach to literature consisted of allowing for the reader and the reader's life to contribute to the sounding, meaning, and reception of the text, *Infinite Summer's* democratic approach functions in a similar way: the medium of the blog coaxes auto/biographical writing, which contributes to the reading, meaning, and reception of the text. The blog invites or coerces “people to *feel* their own place” in *Infinite Jest* and in the blog (Papacharissi *Affective Publics* 4; original emphasis).

Affirmational auto/biographies that *feel* their place in *Infinite Jest* re-state the novel's writing on its themes of mental health, drugs, and addiction. These readers make sense and meaning of the novel and/or their lives, creating a feeling of community out of the vulnerability and intimacy these life narratives evoke. As Dave Laird writes in his first *Infinite Winter* post, “I sometimes even think that I might not be able to be fully understood by another person unless they've also read this book. I know that sounds pretentious and exclusive, hyperbolic even (and maybe it is), but I'd be willing to bet that other readers of *Jest* might be able to Identify.” (“The Generous Relenting” n.p.). Although this statement *does not* apply to all other readers of *Infinite*



*Jest*, this declaration of deep personal attachment to the book is not uncommon throughout *Infinite Summer* or in *Poor Yoricks' Summer*. In the first week of *Poor Yoricks' Summer*, Ramji notes that “reading *Infinite Jest* is incredibly personal” (“Getting Personal (avec Socks)” n.p.). She adds, “When I first began reading *Infinite Jest* around 2011, I was going through some heavy crap. I had refused to talk, for starters. Imagine when I read the first few pages of *IJ* — the narrator (arguably Hal) articulating: ‘I cannot make myself understood,’ and then a few sentences later, Hal saying: ‘I cannot make myself understood, now.’ I finally felt understood, of course” (n.p.). While Ramji noted to me that she would rather not write about what that “heavy crap” exactly was, she still does *talk* about it rather than remaining silent as she did in her past. As the quote above demonstrates, Ramji quotes from the novel in order to articulate the “heavy crap” she experienced in her past without fully revealing personal details. The novel becomes a means to comfortably discuss her struggles with mental illness/addiction while also providing her some protection from the vulnerability of sharing such a life narrative. Moreover, Ramji significantly notes that reading *Infinite Jest*, specifically, provided her with a feeling of being understood and a means of articulating her “heavy crap” that other books, films, and/or TV had not provided.

Posts that use the novel to articulate their struggles with mental health or addiction, implicitly or explicitly, create an intimacy with other readers; participants feel understood because the discussions of mental health and addiction are less stigmatized. The most explicit affirmational auto/biography in *Infinite Summer* that uses the novel to articulate their struggles with addiction is infinitedetox’s guest post, “Waving the White Flag: Reading as Rehabilitation.” infinitedetox opens with “My name is infinitedetox and I am an addict” (n.p.). In the tradition of AA, infinitedetox keeps their identity anonymous and discusses their addiction to

“pharmaceutical opiates.” But the author connects their recent attempt at sobriety with reading *Infinite Jest* alongside *Infinite Summer*. infinitedetox reflects on an earlier attempt within that year they tried to get sober, and this attempt also coincided with reading *Infinite Jest*. They write,

David Foster Wallace had just passed away and I decided to re-read *Infinite Jest* over the holidays, and something difficult to explain happened to me when I began digging into the book again. Somehow the book—and now brace yourself for one of those clichés that Wallace seems so interested in in *IJ*—made me want to be a better person. And it inspired me to stop taking drugs immediately, to Kick the Bird, via a mechanism which I’ve had a hard time articulating. (n.p.; original emphasis)

infinitedetox details that previous time of sobriety only lasted while reading the book—two weeks. But in this post, the author significantly connects their struggles with the depictions of addicts struggling with their sobriety in *Infinite Jest*. The novel supplies them with the ability to articulate what could not be articulated before. infinitedetox argues, “Wallace’s judgements on addicts and addictions fell upon me with great force, and something about the ferocity, coupled with his profound compassion and humaneness toward the subject, compelled me to waste absolutely zero time in booting the pills and Getting My Shit Together” (n.p.). To articulate their own attempt at sobriety, infinitedetox draws from *Infinite Jest*’s language about addiction. infinitedetox finds *Infinite Jest*’s blend of both the rhetoric of AA and the depictions of addicts’ mindset towards AA help with articulating their struggles with addiction. The author uses clichés similar to those in the novel, acknowledges the self-aware cynicism of using clichés that the novel addresses, and employs the AA rhetoric of self-surrender in *Infinite Jest* to write auto/biographically about their addiction and attempts at sobriety.

But beyond the novel being presented as a means of self-realization and motivation to get sober, infinitedetox restates the language of the novel and the novel's depictions of addiction in order to write and share their addiction life narrative with others. The significance of their post is the sharing of their addiction life narrative that grounds and embodies the addiction narratives presented in *Infinite Jest*. Fitzpatrick points out that infinitedetox mistakes the novel as a kind of "cure" for opiate addiction (195). But Fitzpatrick also notes that "*Infinite Summer*...provided Infinitedetox [sic] with both the impetus for a return to the novel and its perspective, as well as a venue for the kind of safe, anonymous sharing that AA inspires" (195). For infinitedetox, then, *Infinite Summer* was an auto/biographical site in which they could share their narrative of drug addiction and sobriety and have it read by others; it is not necessarily the reading of the novel but rather reading and writing *with others* that is important to infinitedetox's post because it gave them an outlet to reflect on and be vulnerable about their addiction while being anonymous. And despite her skepticism about infinitedetox's conflation of reading *Infinite Jest* and sobriety, Fitzpatrick, in her guest post for *Infinite Summer*, writes about how teaching and reading Wallace, who was a colleague of hers at Pomona college, became a means of overcoming the grief of his loss. She writes that teaching and reading Wallace "was meant to give me and a group of students the time we needed to engage with both the loss we felt and the astonishing legacy that Dave left us" ("On Teaching Infinite Jest" n.p.). I do not want to claim that reading *Infinite Jest* is a "cure" for overcoming grief or addiction, but reading *Infinite Jest* plays a significant role for Fitzpatrick and infinitedetox in overcoming their traumas. Reading the novel is presented as giving them something concrete to attach their process to. As Fitzpatrick implicitly suggests, reading the novel with others, in both cases, is a means of sharing that vulnerability and *writing* about it; it creates a space of inclusivity around the issues of mental

health, addiction, or, in the case of Fitzpatrick, grief by lessening the stigma around the public display of these issues.

Writing affirmational auto/biographies is not only a means for readers to feel their place in *Infinite Jest*, but also makes the novel a means for participants to feel their own place in their life and articulate it. Their writing is a process and a product of “[t]uning in affectively” to the novel by narrating their lives and the struggles that they have gone through within the framework of the novel (Papacharissi 4). Writing on self-expression and affect, Papacharissi argues that “[a]ffect conveys the intensity with which an opinion is felt, and when expressed, it can intensify the sense of empowerment experienced by the individual releasing a thought, emotion, or act to the public” (114). When the affective connection to *Infinite Jest* is intense enough, it prompts participants to express auto/biographical responses involving mental health and/or addiction; a participant’s discussion turns inward and self-reflexive, and the post becomes less about the novel than it is about the participant’s (sense of) self. Near the end of *Infinite Summer*, Kennedy realizes that the majority of her posts have been about herself and her affective responses to the text. She exclaims, “See, this is another mark of a terrible critic—I’m making this whole thing about me” (“Often he reckons...” n.p.). Kennedy expresses the vulnerability and self-awareness that occurs when “travers[ing] from private to public,” acknowledging that others are reading or “listening in” (Papacharissi 98). These moments of self-reflexivity and auto/biography—both affirmational and resisting—preserve the participant’s sense of self in relation to a networked public while also making sure not to alienate the self from the group; it is a performance of a networked self. Papacharissi writes, “[p]erforming a networked self requires the crafting of polysemic presentations that make sense to diverse audience and publics without compromising one’s own sense of self. Understood within the greater paradigm of the ongoing, reflexive

storytelling project of the self, networked selves assemble via practices of authorship, listening, and redactions” (112). The self-awareness of “I’m making this all about me” is a way to remind the group that the guides’ attention is always to the others in the group. The guides never make their posts “less about me,” but the pauses, like Kennedy’s, are a means of re-orienting themselves to ensure their attention to others in the group and to avoid “too much about me.”

Although Kennedy refers to her tendency to write auto/biographically as a mark of a terrible critic, all of the other guides (and *Poor Yoricks’ Summer*’s guides) also make “this whole thing about me.” Arguably, the auto/biographical writing of *Infinite Summer* largely contributed to what made the group so successful because of the intimacy it creates between participants and the real-life narratives that ground the fictional narratives in reality and in people. These affirmational auto/biographies and their “all about me”-ness is a performative act of self-expression *and* interpretive analysis of the text that allows others to interpret and analyze the novel from either the perspective of the blogger or from their own personal experience. As Jenni Baker, one of the guides of *Infinite Winter*, told me at the *DFW16* conference, “being personal affords others to open up.” In *Infinite Summer*, Edison makes sure to identify as trans throughout the blog to discuss the representation of gender in *Infinite Jest* and she cites her personal indirect experience with suicide to discuss James Incandenza’s suicide in the novel (“Not the Best Student”; “Aren’t I meant to be the Funny One?”). In both of the blog posts’ comments, commentators thank her for her post, for being “brave” (OneBigParty), and prompting commentators to also discuss the representation of gender and trans people in the novel. infinitedetox’s post coaxed others to open up about their struggles with addiction or about the people close to them who struggle with addiction (ACooper; Court). And those who did not share an addiction narrative thanked infinitedetox for sharing, acknowledging their bravery in

doing so (brittney) and congratulating them on their sobriety (Court). Moreover, some of the comments that thanked infinitedetox for sharing restated the AA rhetoric featured in *Infinite Jest*, such as “Keep coming back” (Matt) and “I would also recommend Taking Certain Steps” (Daniel Summers). infinitedetox’s post affected Kennedy to share her strategies for reading the novel: likening the book to her ashtanga yoga practice. Kennedy writes, “in the sense that it’s become an almost daily practice for which it’s necessary to find a quiet space to focus my mind on an object outside itself” (“P.S. Allston Rules” n.p.). *Infinite Summer*’s affirmational narratives mutually coax other commentators, guides, and guests to share similar narratives of their own struggles with mental health and/or addiction by using the language of the novel *and* of the blog post. Fundamentally affective and relational, posts and comments provide multiple perspectives and interpretations for understanding the novel *and* their own lives in relation to mental health and/or addiction.

Other affirmational auto/biographical posts are not as emotionally sensitive or have as much emotional weight as the abovementioned posts, but the guides’ and guests’ posts consistently use personal insight and experience as a context-expanding gesture to discuss the book. Matthew Baldwin and Kevin Guilfoile consistently bring up their status as authors, sometimes in admiration and other (few) times in critique. Baldwin also identifies as a board game enthusiast, and uses his experience playing board games to discuss the concept of AA’s “analysis paralysis” in *Infinite Jest* (“The Peril of A.P.” n.p.); Guilfoile uses his past experience as a creative director of an ad agency to discuss *Infinite Jest*’s observations on American advertising (“I love you...”). Guest blogger Maria Bustillos shares her correspondences with Wallace, and guest blogger Andrew Womack reflects on his failed career as a tennis player but finds that Wallace’s writing on tennis helps him connect to his father, a passionate (but not

professional) tennis player. The medium of the blog affords this kind of balance between the personal and the public in these auto/biographical posts. Aimée Morrison, Jill Walker Rettberg, and Philippe Lejeune, among other life writing scholars, have pointed out that one of the genres of blogs is diary-like. Further, Anna Poletti and Julie Rak argue that “[i]nternet affordances help to determine how we will behave online, because they direct us to act in certain ways and even be a certain type of person. . . [they] can work (sometimes covertly) to create the terms for identification and the rules for social interaction” (5). *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* afforded auto/biographical behaviour as a means of thinking through the novel in a group blog. Additionally, these blogs established the terms of identification in the context of the *Infinite Jest*: tennis, addiction, mental health, and the myriad of other topics within *Infinite Jest*. As Morrison elaborates, these affordances are not only technological but social as well. She argues, “Users are *coached* by what they read in the display interface at the same time they are *coaxed* by design of the composition interface” (“Facebook and Coaxed Affordances” 125; my emphasis). Morrison is referring to Facebook, but I would like to extend this argument to blogs as well. The diary-like nature of the blog coaxed *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* discussions of (reading) the novel to be auto/biographical as much as these auto/biographical posts coach and coax others to read and think through the novel auto/biographically, setting the terms of identification and the rules of social interaction in which personal, fragmentary narratives are shared amongst one another.

### **“I am not enjoying this book”: Oppositional Auto/biographies and Decentering Wallace**

Although there are *more* auto/biographical posts that identify with the novel, there are a fair number of *oppositional auto/biographies* in *Infinite Summer* that challenge the merits of the novel and are unable to identify with the novel and its characters, while also resisting

individualistic and “rigorous” reading practices that depart from the group of the blog. Oppositional auto/biographies are just as, if not more, fundamental to the communal feeling of the *Infinite Jest* reading group than affirmational auto/biographies because they contribute to an “unworking” (Blanchot)—writing that works towards making the blog and its discussions more inclusive. Oppositional auto/biographies in *Infinite Summer* employ auto/biographical writing to resist the normative American identity/ies and values presented in the novel *and* the normative interpretations in the reading group because they cannot identify with the novel or with something written by the guides, guests, or fellow participants. A reading community, as Rehberg Sedo suggests, is not without this practice of resisting reading since reading communities “have in common political and cultural conflicts, both internal and external” (11). These oppositional auto/biographies create a space for discussion around *Infinite Jest*’s poor representations of race and gender and significantly draw attention to its limitations in representing late twentieth to twenty-first century American life. This “conflict” is both internal (in the sense of within the reading group blog) and external (in the sense of cultural and national ideologies that permeate the group). Oppositional auto/biographies challenge how accurate Wallace’s own attempt addresses that all-encompassing “human troubles and emotions” in *Infinite Jest* and point beyond the book, noting its failure just as Stein recognized her own failure in *The Making of Americans* (“E Unibus Pluram” 81). Moreover, oppositional auto/biographies demand that other participants think more diversely and inclusively, and thereby affect further critical work on Wallace’s oeuvre because of the tension and discomfort these oppositional auto/biographies create.

Oppositional auto/biographies in *Infinite Summer* open a space within the text for the reader to articulate their self, their human troubles and emotions that are not present in the novel.



These auto/biographies and the discussions of the novel's shortcomings also make the novel vulnerable to critique, affording criticism and unfavourable opinions of the novel that affirmational auto/biographies do not necessarily afford. However, as I stressed before, most readers can and do write both affirmational and oppositional auto/biographies across the duration of *Infinite Summer*, which is typical in reading communities. As Rehberg Sedo argues, "[reading] community members search for meaning within a text, *sort out power structures*, and, ultimately, gain the knowledge that comes from exposure to, and discussion of, new and unfamiliar concepts" (Rehberg Sedo 11; my emphasis). I prefer to argue that readers *negotiate* power structures that come with *Infinite Jest* and those that creep into the reading group. When Edison exclaims in the title of her blog post, "I am not enjoying this book," it ruptures and exposes the power structures of the novel and those around it, creating a space within the group to articulate herself and a space in which the structures of "liking" or "admiring" the book is negotiated. Such a rupture establishes a space of action wherein deliberation and an articulation of the self in relation to others can occur. The online reading group format that *Infinite Summer* maintained, with its weekly schedule and daily blog posts, affords these ruptures to occur throughout the novel and more frequently. The format affords introspection firmly situated in the present of reading a novel rather than the retrospection of finishing a novel; the spaces in which readers create to articulate their self becomes more frequent and thorough, permeating the novel and opening it up to others. Thus, the novel, too, is made vulnerable: it is exposed and open to others.

The articulation of the self in relation to others in *Infinite Summer* is simultaneously a performance of a networked self and a process of decentering. In the very beginning of *Infinite Summer* Wallace is decentered in order to make a space for the guides and for the participants to articulate their self. In Baldwin's introductory post, he takes a jab at Wallace's writing outside of

*Infinite Jest*, drawing attention to a “train wreck of a sentence” in “The View From Mrs. Thompson.” He points out that, after reading that essay, “if I hadn’t already announced *Infinite Summer*, that might have been its end” (“Mountaineering” n.p.). Baldwin’s initial impressions of Wallace decenter Wallace’s authorial presence and characterize his writing as having the potential to be flawed. Further, Baldwin’s critique welcomes similar reactions that dislike a sentence, a short story, a novel, or an essay by Wallace. In Baldwin’s subsequent post, “Deep Sea Diving,” he refers to the endnotes as having a “pretentiousness” to them, questioning Wallace’s stylistic choices and sharing what other participants might be feeling when flipping back and forth between the endnotes.<sup>46</sup> In his introductory post, Guilfoile argues, “A lot of what you *do* get isn’t anything that even occurred to Wallace in the first place.” (“Fiction’s dirty little secret” n.p.). Baldwin’s and Guilfoile’s approach to Wallace is through the lens of writing because both are fiction writers, and so their process of decentering Wallace is a means of articulating their identity (and competency) as a writer. Moreover, these moments of decentering Wallace are a rhetorical strategy that ensures the participants that their hesitant feelings about the novel and thoughts that run contrary to popular opinions of the novel are completely valid. In short, decentering Wallace is a rhetorical strategy that prevents exclusion. In all four of the guides’ posts, the articulation of resisting reading—making resisting interpretations public—is a tactic that allows for participants to be comfortable with disliking or not identifying with the novel. While this may occur at a sentence level or a feeling about the novel’s stylistic choices—what Joan Bessman Taylor calls “reading as dissection,” in which materialist critiques are made

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<sup>46</sup> However, *Infinite Summer* does contain hyperlink endnotes, which is an affirmational design. But the pretentiousness and annoyance that Baldwin and other participants discuss is the process of flipping a thousand page book back and forth to read those endnotes.

(145)—the oppositional auto/biographies in *Infinite Summer* also discuss “proper reading” and representation of gender and race, as well.

As a guide or a guest blogger in an online reading group, you are in a position of authority—imposing norms and setting up how other participants (and even fellow guides and guests) approach and interpret the novel. There are times, however, when guests’ and guides’ interpretations may be resisted when these guides/guests are not being open to other reading practices and the life stories that accompany these narratives. Nick Douglas’s guest post, “Skim is for Wimps,” was met with resistance because the blog post imposes a normative reading practice that ignores the communal values of *Infinite Summer*. Instead of the affirmational sharing about reading practices and about how participants are sticking to the schedule, Douglas disvalues all reading practices other than his own, which consists of struggling to read every single word carefully. Douglas even goes so far to state that “skimming *Infinite Jest* is stupid” (n.p.). He relates one story in which, “Someone saw me struggling over one dull page of *IJ* this week...and recommended I skim it. She hasn’t, of course, read her copy of the book” (n.p.). This reading practice does not respect *Infinite Summer*’s schedule, which encourages reading the book at a steady pace that weaves into daily life rather than a close reading that time is set aside for. Not only does Douglas characterize his reading as rigorous and heroic, but he also devalues and mocks the woman’s opinion, presuming she has not or cannot read *Infinite Jest* because she skims. Douglas presents reading as a masculine struggle in his characterization of his reading habits, using words like “struggle” and “exercise” to describe his reading, and “wimps” and “stupid” to denote any other reading practices than his. Moreover, improper, “stupid” reading is characterized as feminine because of the way he sets up a woman’s suggestion to skim as an example of someone who “hasn’t, of course, read her copy of the book.” By doing so, Douglas

imposes a normative reading practice on everyone in the group that runs contrary to the ethos of *Infinite Summer* that allows for sharing strategies to finish reading the book. Douglas implies that no one “reads” the book until they have truly “read” the book as he does.

The majority of the comments, however, disagree with Douglas, challenging his stance with regards to the normative idea of reading as a herculean struggle by including auto/biographical disclosures about the importance of skimming.<sup>47</sup> Noting the presumptuousness of his “instruction” and judgement of others’ reading practices, Gladis writes, “sigh... thanks, Nick” (n.p.). Prolixian and Ozma point out that skimming is a valid and important reading skill. In defense of skimmers, Prolixian writes, “I wouldn’t call out skimmers as wimps. The ability to skim reading material is critical in many contexts” (n.p.). Ozma, further emphasizing the *work* of skimming, adds, “Wellll...It’s not like the skimmer is not engaged—I got all the crucial things you mention as a fast read—I think the fast reader is often your impatient gotta-have-it-now/what’s-gonna-happen-next type” (Ozma n.p.). And Dedalus points out that Douglas is not acknowledging that other people have different reading preferences that work for them:

The wonderful thing about some books is how they affect our individual reading styles....I find skimming helpful on occasion...Yes, I probably miss a few key things here and there when I skim, but I know I’m not gonna “get” everything with this book as is...Skimming...helps me avoid getting bogged down in a passage that might make me return the book back to the shelf. (Dedalus n.p.)

Unlike Douglas who assumes that whoever skims are not reading the book, Dedalus, like others, argues that skimming is what guarantees he finishes the book and that it is pretentious to assume

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<sup>47</sup>. It’s important to note that Matt Bucher’s advocacy post noted that when he finally finished reading the book, he had skimmed parts of it. Skimming had been encouraged, even advocated, from the outset of *Infinite Summer* as a means of reading with the group.

that you can understand a book on the first read. Whereas Douglas's post demands that participants avoid skimming and mocks them if they do, the comments of his blog post counter the imposition of a reading practice norm to reinforce a democratic understanding of reading that respects and invites, as Dedalus points out, individual reading styles. Moreover, Dedalus emphasizes the ways in which a book *affects* individual reading styles. These comments that defend the values of respecting and inviting individual reading styles that the novel affects resonates with the values of readers' agency and non-normative reading practices that Stein embraces and achieves in her work that "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography* demonstrated.

But just as some posts' life narratives impose a normative practice on the group, the comments, too, potentially enforce normative thinking and/or performing normativity in order to conceal resisting reactions. Throughout *Infinite Summer* oppositional auto/biographies are indirectly and (sometimes) directly silenced; they are frowned upon and/or devalued. Moreover, the resentment towards oppositional auto/biographies is *felt*—it is an affective intensity that shapes the writing of bloggers and comments. In one of Fournier's posts for *Poor Yoricks' Summer* in which she shares her frustrations with the novel, she writes:

Alright, unpopular opinion time...

I'm starting to get a bit frustrated with *Infinite Jest*.

*\*winces\**

I'm sorry. I really am. I know how much this book means to a lot of you out there and, believe me, I'm trying every week to remain open to all of the characters and the footnotes and the dialogue and the plot, but... I'm struggling. Not with content (I understand who's who and what's what), but with connection. I find it very difficult to enjoy a novel when I'm not connecting with at least one part of it

and, even now at page 650, I still don't feel as if I've established that crucial connection with anyone or anything. ("The Wind Beneath My Wings" n.p.; original emphasis)

Fournier is anxiously self-aware of performing a networked self. She "hedges" when she admits that she is frustrated with the novel: she is apologetic and calls her opinion "unpopular"; she is anxious and anticipates backlash, as indicated by "\*winces\*." Fournier specifically ties her enjoyment of a novel to how it connects to her life, and thus her dislike of *Infinite Jest* coaxes a disclosure to convey her inability to connect to the novel. The majority of the comments in response include "advice" or similar experiences of people who eventually learned to love the book, which subverts any kind of validation for Fournier's dislike of the novel. The result of these comments, and previous ones like it, caused Fournier to withhold dislike of the novel throughout the reading group and coerced her into writing more about what she liked instead.

In *Infinite Summer*, Edison, too, holds back on her dislike of the novel, in a way that limits the kinds of life narratives she can tell. Specifically, for Edison and Fournier, it's the topic of gender and the poor representation of women and trans people in *Infinite Jest*. And yet Edison and Fournier each hold back from discussing their frustrations and these problems for fear of upsetting others or discouraging people from reading the blog. In the same post in which Edison writes an affirmational life narrative about being trans and the humour she encountered with Hugh Steeply's feminine disguise in *Infinite Jest*, she is prompted by a commentator, Kendall Joy, to discuss the problematic representation of genderplay in *Infinite Jest*. Joy, who identifies as cisgendered queer in her comment, writes, "I feel like there's a current of gender/sexuality policing being done I guess by characters (tennis students calling each other fag, etc), and I've been sort of uncomfortable with that. Maybe I don't know how to read the Marathe/Steeply stuff,

given that, but I'm happy to hear you read it as delightful" (n.p.). In response, Edison comments that she, too, is beginning to feel uncomfortable with the representations of genderplay, reassuring Joy that she is reading "properly." She writes, "The gender theme is popping up more and more, though, and I'm not sure I'm entirely thrilled with it overall so far. There is a tendency in media to punish any kind of genderplay, and I think that's evidenced her[e] by the passage describing Millicent Kent's father's experiments with cross-dressing" ("Not the Best Student" n.p.). Joy's comments coaxes Edison into communicating her discomfort that she had been feeling but did not admit in her original post; the comment opened up a space within that networked public to discuss issues important to Edison. And when Edison communicates her discomfort, she points to an underlying trend in media to stigmatize and criminalize trans-people or any kind of genderplay, bringing into the group knowledge that other participants do not have and which, as Guilfoile suggests, Wallace had probably not been aware of. In doing so, Edison exposes the cultural norms in which *Infinite Jest* contributes to and/or is a part of.

The failure of connection is personal because, for Edison, it reminds her of her own and others' experiences of being silenced by cultural norms perpetuated by poor representations of trans people in popular media/entertainment. This discomfort and the knowledge it creates, however, is mostly kept in the comments. Although the "Midsummer Roundtable" brings back the question of gender, Edison admits that she is okay with it for the most part. But she still communicates an issue she has with Orin falling in love with Steeply in his "disguise": "It seems like an innocuous trope, but it reinforces the concept that trans-women 'trick' everyone they don't explicitly divulge their status to. The idea that people are entitled to such information leads to the 'trans panic' defense, which is used to justify violence against transgender people on a sadly routine basis. Aaaaaand I've talked for far too long about this." (Midsummer Roundtable,

part III n.p.). Later in that same roundtable, in response to a discussion about the Steeply/Marathe sections, she begins with “To touch lightly (lest I type out another ‘trans-issues’ screed) on the Steeply thing...” (n.p.). “To touch lightly” is an adequate description of the affective withholding of personal interpretations that are coaxed by the failure of connection. While Edison may admit that she is “okay” with the representation of gender and genderplay in the novel, she is clearly self-censoring. Edison does enjoy the novel by the end of the summer, connecting to its depictions of mental illness and addiction. But there are moments throughout *Infinite Summer* when she only touches lightly on the subject of the representation of trans people and women because of the overwhelming pressure that affirmational auto/biographies create. This pressure pushes oppositional auto/biographies into the comments or into “hedging” around the issue.

These admissions of frustration peppered throughout *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* challenge the idea of an online reading group as an *inherently* democratic space that invites and respects differing opinions and interpretations and lives/life narratives. Too often, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the internet is seen as a democratic medium because anyone with a connection can write and “speak up.” Rehberg Sedo claims that “social networking sites, along with literary blogs or LitBlogs...have reconfigured traditional notions of cultural authority, making it possible for anyone to become a writer, and for anyone with an Internet connection and a desire to express his or her opinion to become a reviewer” (7). While this statement holds partly true in the sense that the reading group’s guides are not well-established, institutional authority figures on American literature, there are still ways in which cultural authority and norms are carried on through and established by readers. These norms and canons are not solely perpetuated by academia; publisher advertising, institutional book clubs



(such as Oprah's, Book-of-the-Month Club, or Canada Reads), primary education curriculum, and even book stores and libraries (via staff picks and organization of books under such titles as "classics" or "must reads") can all potentially shape readers into carrying forward and repeating the traditional cultural authority of institutions under the guise of self-published criticism online. Moreover, as the admissions of frustration and the (self-)silencing that I have shown demonstrate, not *anyone* can express his or her opinion as Rehberg Sedo suggests. They may be able to express an opinion, *but not always the opinion that they desire to express*. Indeed, this is an issue of community, in which the parameters set by the community exclude certain expressions and topics; but the issue is precisely the limits of the community's democratic sensibility, its openness to other expressions and opinions that, for some, the internet inherently allows for. Fournier's hedging around her frustrations with the book and Edison's comment that she is talking way too much about trans issues demonstrate that cultural authority is still enforced and is *felt* in these online spaces, therefore contributing to feelings of exclusion and self-censoring. Cultural authority may no longer solely reside in an institutional figure, as Redo points out, but it remains as an ideology that permeates discussions and a *feeling* felt by participants that dictates what expressions and opinions are appropriate and proper.

Both *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks' Summer* do not necessarily reconfigure norms, but they do produce spaces to challenge these norms and traditional notions of cultural authority. Despite the "hedging" and "touching lightly" that affirmational auto/biographies coerce, utterances like Edison's and Fournier's encourage others to write oppositional auto/biographies, increasing their frequency. To "touch lightly" is better than to not touch the subject at all, sparking conversations on topics that are overlooked. It is up to the guides and the curator of the blog to produce these spaces and to keep these spaces alive, and this requires a lot of care work

and affective labour. *Infinite Summer*'s weekly roundups and its roundtable discussions continued the discussions of gender. However, it was mostly Edison that contributed to the discussion; the other guides, unfortunately, remained silent on it. And although Edison may have withheld a lot more than she could have said, she is not completely silent. As Fuller and Rehberg Sedo argue, "[s]hared reading becomes a social practice that is not only ideologically dynamic and disruptive, but also potentially creative and even politically empowering in terms of permitting citizens the agency to speak out loud about subjects that were tacit knowledge" (185). Oppositional auto/biographies are what produce dynamism and disruption in these reading groups; it produces a space for individuals to share tacit knowledge significant to them with others in the group, such as the lack of personal connection or personal insult. Fournier did continue to share her frustrations and defended her position on the lack of women represented in the novel. And she did so because she had the continued support of myself and her fellow guides, who supported and seconded her opinions in the comments or who carried on her discussion. So, while the discussion of gender in *Infinite Jest* may not have been a frequent topic in *Poor Yoricks' Summer*, it was a present one that was important to the group.

Posts like Fournier's and Edison's, and the continued conversations they spark, do sway others' opinions on the issues of gender representation in *Infinite Jest*. Although I cannot make this claim for every participant, reading and participating in these *Infinite Jest* reading groups significantly altered my perspective on the novel and made me consider gender and race representation more critically than I had before. At the time of *Poor Yoricks' Summer*, these topics of race and gender were barely to be found in academic conferences that I had attended or in scholarly articles on Wallace; they did not emerge while discussing the novel with fans of Wallace's work; nor were these issues present in journalism about Wallace. The realization of

how infrequent and few these discussions were made it urgent for me to have Clare Hayes-Brady, one of the very few scholars who has written on *Infinite Jest* and gender, as a guest blogger. Hayes-Brady's post not only kept alive the conversation but also created a post that Fournier identified with. Concluding her post, Hayes-Brady reflects on how reading has shaped her and how it will shape her newborn daughter: "I read the representation of women and girls in the novels I hope she will read, and I wonder how they have shaped me, how they will shape her, and how skewing to the familiar is both comforting and coddling" (n.p.). She hopes that her daughter, like her, can reconsider, re-evaluate, and resist those representations of women, like those in *Infinite Jest*, that she comes across and to be aware of how these narratives have shaped and shape her. Fournier comments, "I wish I could 'love' this post rather than just 'like' it...I feel like you laid bare all of my reservations about the novel and so eloquently put into words everything that rubs me the wrong way. Like you said, the way Wallace writes his women is so off-putting and it often makes me feel excluded from the boys club that is *Infinite Jest*" (n.p.). For Fournier, Hayes-Brady demonstrates that a fan of Wallace, like herself, can still be critical of Wallace's work; Fournier felt included when feelings of exclusion were beginning to overwhelm her. Hayes-Brady's blog post and her interaction between her and Fournier and other participants stress how important curation and moderation is to this community. Despite *Infinite Jest* not providing any form of identification for some readers, oppositional auto/biographies allow for identification for those who dislike the novel or who feel excluded by the novel and its fans in the group; it becomes an inclusive space to reconsider and re-evaluate their sense of who they are with the novel's representations.

Identification plays a crucial role in *Infinite Jest*, not only in the AA sections, where the term is predominantly used, but also as an undercurrent theme throughout the novel.

Identification and identity, in the novel, are presented as fundamentally relational, and the novel's plots and character arcs put forward that the American ideology of the "pursuit of happiness" neglects this relationality and drives American citizens to think of identity as individualist, competitive, and solipsistic. In a section of the novel that focuses on the proceedings of Boston AA and the practices of *listening* that are implicitly required, the narrator notes that counselors suggest to those in AA that they "try to Identify instead of Compare. Again, *Identify* means empathize" (*IJ* 345). Identification with addiction life narratives in *Infinite Jest's* AA is a means of "listening for the similarities" in their experiences with drug addiction in order to create solidarity and inclusion (347). This mode of listening is very similar to the listening of Stein that she conveys in "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans" that made her aware of the relational identity of people. "Comparison," in *Infinite Jest*, discredits and invalidates others' struggles and isolates the individual who is doing the comparing. To emphasize the faults of Comparison, the narrator stresses that Boston AA has the individual accept that "[y]ou are not unique" (*IJ* 349). No life narrative about addiction should be treated as separate from others because doing so discounts the shared experience of struggling with addiction. The abandonment of uniqueness is not a complete abandonment of the self but rather the acknowledgement that the self and knowledge of the self is found within the relationality that identification affords.

In *Infinite Jest* reading groups, identification works in a similar way; identification is crucial amongst all members in a reading group because it gives a greater understanding of the novel itself, validating and respecting others' perspectives and experiences. The feature of pingbacks—hyperlinks that link back to an earlier post—or the acknowledgement by a blogger that they will be springboarding off of another guide's or guest's post is a means of identification

while also stressing the relationality of the blog and its reading experience. This relationality and identification that the blog affords contextualizes the reading experience as a shared experience in which there is no one unique reading or experience of the novel. Edison calls out some “fans” of the book who commented in her post “I am not enjoying this book” that she should just give up and stop reading the book. She writes, “For what it’s worth, I feel like I should tell you that you guys would be terrible at AA.” (Edison, “Humble Pie” n.p.). For Edison, comments that identified with her frustrations are the ones that kept her motivated to read the novel and approach it afresh. And although she does not write why these comments motivated her, I believe that she no longer felt excluded from, as Fournier puts it, a boy’s club who do not admit their frustrations or problems with the book. As one commentator points out, “I have to admit that I’ve fallen into the suspicion of wondering whether some people are enjoying this book as much as they claim.” (Henderson n.p.). Henderson draws attention to other murmurs throughout the blog that find issues with its humour (or does not find it humorous at all) or its male-centered focus. But he also points out that people may be silencing themselves or hiding any dislike of the novel, encouraging others to share *any* kind of frustration in order to make a space for those who dislike the novel or aspects of the novel.

Edison’s and Fournier’s declaration of disliking *Infinite Jest*, then, is *not* a means of distancing themselves from the book but rather a means of reaching out to others who feel similarly but remain silent; it is a means of creating inclusion and a form of disruption that draws attention to critiques of the novel that are important but may be overlooked by others.

Oppositional auto/biographies are crucial for providing a multifaceted reading experience that provides a greater understanding of the novel; it is, ultimately, crucial for a *shared* experience because oppositional auto/biographies remind readers about differing perspectives and the lives

of others who are not represented within the novel. And although some participants in the reading group may not identify with the content of the book, they are still able to identify with others in the reading group and be more open about their own personal reactions to reading the book.

Critique of *Infinite Jest* in *Infinite Jest* reading groups—and in reading groups, in general—is a means of self-articulation, of sharing a personal opinion that reflects a life or an aspect of one’s life and its narratives. This process can and usually does result in decentering the author, but it can also be a means of addressing the problems of exclusion when it comes to the American canon that *Infinite Jest* is quickly becoming a part of. While discussions of gender in *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* did draw attention to already-apparent exclusion of women by heavily focusing on the American male experience, discussions of race in *Infinite Summer* are what specifically put forward the topic of the American canon and its continued tendency to exclude writers of colour and/or privilege white male writers. In Nick Maniatis’s first guest post on *Infinite Summer*, he makes a comment about the “Clenette” section (*Infinite Jest* 37-8) and the “yrstruly” section (128-35) that sparks a debate in the comments. It is the Clenette section in particular that sparks the debate because of Wallace’s attempt at writing African American Vernacular English. Maniatis writes, “I found them hard the first time too. I also had an inner urge to find them offensive. Was Wallace making fun of these people? How come the other sections don’t read like this? What is he trying to accomplish?” (“The Howling Fantods” n.p.). In response to this comment, a participant, Ozma, writes back,

I don’t think my reaction to this would be described as ‘offended.’ It’s like fingernails on a blackboard. I inwardly cringe. I am slightly sickened. They make me distrust the author. The suburbanite whiteness of the author starts to become

glaringly apparent and casts a pall over the rest of the novel such that I am like  
'wow, this really is some kind of sheltered suburbanite college student's novel.'

(n.p.)

Ozma does not share whether or not he is a black American, but he does give hints that he comes from a diverse city: he calls Wallace's writing indicative of a "suburbanite whiteness" and *Infinite Jest* a sheltered college student's novel. And by doing so, Ozma draws attention to the problems with canonizing *Infinite Jest* and/or the rhetoric behind its canonization: it privileges and ascribes power to a narrow and "sheltered" suburbanite white male perspective that excludes and devalues the perspectives of women and people of colour. Moreover, canonization can contribute to overlooking the kinds of racist and sexist passages in the novel, creating an aura of invulnerability to critique around the novel and the rest of Wallace's work.

By acknowledging the failure of Wallace's novel and critiquing the apologia and dismissiveness of claims to Wallace's "genius," Ozma demonstrates the act of "affective citizenship" within a reading group. Affective citizenship is the "part of being a citizen that we attempt to claim for ourselves within our everyday lives" (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 213). While not in his terms, Ozma's argument stresses the importance as an American citizen to draw attention to the exclusion and/or the poor representation of black Americans in *Infinite Jest*. Ozma has mentioned before that he really enjoys the book ("Breathing into a paper bag" n.p.), but he points out that any flaws cannot be "explained away by his genius" and states that "[t]he issue isn't political correctness but bad writing" ("The Howling Fantods" n.p.). Some agree with Ozma, re-emphasizing his point that it is important that Wallace's "genius" does not excuse representations that are racist and sexist. Octopus Grigori replies, "DFW, to me, just doesn't seem to have any ability to portray nonwhite, non-middle class, nonsuburban characters...with

anything like authenticity or true sympathy” (n.p.). Others either try to defend Wallace or explain the linguistics behind the voices of Wallace’s black characters that some people found offensive. One commentator, “The Marine who gnew [sic] Wallace,” refutes all criticisms on the basis of having supposedly known Wallace. Yet, Olja, among others, supports Ozma, reassuring him that he’s not “annoying,” as he admitted to feeling. She writes, “so far it appears to me that DFW describes the world from a ‘whiteness’-as-default perspective. Someone might note that that’s how the world ‘is’, but this world is lived from many points of view, not just one, and I’d like an innovative novel to give me an access to new ones or new ways of looking at old ones” (n.p.). She adds further, “I’m glad to be reading IJ and DFW’s work in general, but I don’t think I have to find it perfect, and am slightly annoyed by the commentators who appear to be on a mission to explain and justify every single thing about DFW and his work, and even make it all appear as something intentional and often brilliant as well” (n.p.). In sharing their problems with *Infinite Jest*’s point of view and representation, these readers perform affective citizenship. They are affected by the novel’s poor representation of race to share the reading goals they would like to achieve in their life as an American citizen, a citizen who reads diversely and from several points of view and acknowledges the shortcomings of writers. As Olga points out, she is glad to be reading *Infinite Jest* and does not expect Wallace to be able to be all-inclusive, but its failures should be a significant point to address and a prompt to move on and explore other literature, not to defend it as *the* American novel.<sup>48</sup> Just as Stein does in *The Making of Americans* and

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<sup>48</sup>. Amy Hungerford has made this argument in relation to Wallace’s work in “On Refusing to Read”: “My small act of countercultural scholarly agency has been to refuse to continue reading or assigning the work of David Foster Wallace...Our time is better spent elsewhere” (n.p.). As an American scholar and an American citizen, Hungerford aligns her act of refusing to read or assign Wallace as a countercultural move. Or see Jamie Loftus’s “I am eating *Infinite Jest* and will not stop,” in which she records herself eating pages from *Infinite Jest* in a variety of ways in response to “being asked for the thousandth time by gaunt English majors in



*Everybody's Autobiography*, these readers draw attention to the failure of *Infinite Jest*; their writing forces *Infinite Jest* to point outside of itself to those who it failed to include but whose stories, when reading the novel, are invaluable to the novel and to the group reading the novel.

These discussions of race do not gain a prominent foothold afterwards in *Infinite Summer* but fortunately emerge from the comments and into the main blog posts, appearing in the “Roundup” of that week and in Baldwin’s “Missed Connections” post. In that week’s “Roundup,” Baldwin includes a quote from one of the blogs following along, Gayla’s *Beautiful Screaming Lady* (now defunct): “The problem is that there’s also a lot of—not bad writing, but problematic writing, and there are a lot of paragraphs where I feel that Wallace’s point is not so much to communicate with me as to show me what a virtuoso he is...And that’s why I don’t trust David Foster Wallace” (qtd in Baldwin “Round Up” n.p.). Gayla points to a significant barrier that appears in Wallace’s literary efforts: despite his efforts to communicate with and gain the trust of the reader, escaping the solipsism and narcissism that he was so afraid of enacting, there are still readers who cannot trust or connect to Wallace. Online *Infinite Jest* reading groups, however, afford the opportunity for readers in the group to connect and build trust with each other; what becomes more important are the lives and experiences of others in the group reacting to the novel rather than the characters in the novel or Wallace himself. While Baldwin does not necessarily share the opinions of Gayla, it is still significant that he reposts comments like these and hyperlinks these comments and the discussion of race in *Infinite Jest* throughout *Infinite Summer*’s blog posts. Reposting and hyperlinking these discussions are still acts that build the

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debt if I have read *Infinite Jest*.” While Loftus is humorous and Hungerford more academically focused, both refuse to give any more time to Wallace’s work in order to give more time to other writers and to critique canonization. Their refusal is both personal and an act of affective citizenship.

community of the reading group by affording the potential—rather than the silencing—of diverse perspectives. As Rehberg Sedo argues about reading clubs, “not only does the *act* of reading function as a community-building exercise, but also that exchanges of letters, books and interpretations serve as both real and imagined community building blocks, taking their place as markers of membership of a community but also acting as barriers” (Rehberg Sedo 5).

Affirmational auto/biographies can build those barriers if they refuse to *listen* to others, whereas oppositional auto/biographies are meant to dismantle those barriers or at least provide an opening, an entryway for others to enter that reading community. In *Infinite Summer* and in *Poor Yoricks’ Summer*, it’s a balance of both modes of auto/biographical writing that particularly builds a community around the book.

While these exchanges of critique in *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* are not explicitly auto/biographical narratives, they do contain moments of autobiographical expression which seek to resist “Wallace, the author” in order to situate the participant’s experiences at the fore. Acknowledging the failures of Wallace is a means of acknowledging the self’s agency and connection to that novel, even if that “connection” is resisting. As Ozma puts it, “I don’t want to see Wallace in the text. I am doing everything I can to AVOID seeing Wallace in the text” (“Howling Fantods” n.p.) There is an affective and interpersonal push and pull between those who *want to see Wallace in the text* and those who *do not want to see Wallace in the text*. Those who do want to see Wallace in the text, conflate Wallace with his work and identify with the thoughts and feelings his work provokes. Those who do not want to see Wallace in the text, want to see themselves and their thoughts and feelings in the text, which is also provoked by the text but on a different affective register. As Ozma states in defense of his critiques of the novel, “I am not firmly seated in my views. I’m just reading the book and this is what I keep thinking and

feeling when I run across these things” (n.p.). Ozma’s and others’ defense of their critiques is also a defense of themselves, coerced into self-reflexive auto/biographical statements such as Ozma’s (“I’m just reading...” n.p.). And as Ozma rightly points out, oppositional auto/biographies do not mean that the individual firmly takes on a position but is rather an invitation for others to engage in affective citizenship and share their thoughts and feelings. Oppositional auto/biographies are a risk, which is not without hesitation, hedging, and debate. But it is a risk taken in the hopes of building community and recognizing one another’s difference of perspectives, opinions, and tastes.

### **Conclusion: Building Networks, Unworking Barriers**

As *Infinite Summer* was approaching its end, Nick Maniatis claimed that “[t]his book builds networks and facilitates relationships” (“In Search of Firm Ground” n.p.). A bold claim for one book. On one hand, I can agree with this statement: despite it being a one-book-and-done book club, *Infinite Summer* was successful in gathering participants, and the interactions throughout the blog showcase an intimate relationship among guides, guests, and participants. And while *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* was smaller than *Infinite Summer* in size and scope, people still reached out to tell me that they would not have read the book if it were not for the blog, and I reached out to others who I may have not reached out to otherwise. In this regard, *Infinite Jest* and/or the act of reading *Infinite Jest* online did facilitate a feeling of community between the guides and I, between the participants and us guides, and between myself and those who participated in f2f weekly meetings in Waterloo. On the other hand, I cannot help but align this enthusiasm about *Infinite Jest*’s inherent network building with the enthusiasm that early proponents of the Internet claimed about the Internet’s inherent ability to build networks and facilitate relationships. Those who offer resisting interpretations of the text have to negotiate the

icy waters of the cultural norms associated with *Infinite Jest* and the cold frigidity of affirmational readers when critiques of the novel are made. So, the novel does not necessarily build networks and relationships; rather, it has its entryways in which people build relationships and networks within and it has its barriers in which people either reinforce or dismantle.

Contrary to Maniatis's statement, *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks' Summer* demonstrate that it is the people within these reading communities that build networks and facilitate relationships, not *Infinite Jest*. Yes, *Infinite Jest* does coax readers to share their life narratives, but it is ultimately up to the individual to share these narratives with others, and it is necessary for others to *listen* and accept these narratives. This reciprocity between participants and the vulnerability it requires of others is what works towards community.

Thus, it is not simply the participation within these reading communities that builds networks and facilitates relationships; rather, the participants' auto/biographical writing and the auto/biographical interplay between blog posts and comments are what generate the feelings of community. Although the guides of *Poor Yoricks' Summer* had been informed of my research focus on auto/biography, they admitted that they forgot this detail while blogging. And yet, they all wrote auto/biographically, with the slight exception of Ramji who refrained from writing too auto/biographically because she was uncomfortable sharing the details of her personal connection to the novel. In a questionnaire, I asked the guides why they were drawn to writing auto/biographically. Deluca responded that it just "felt natural and funny" and was a reflection of who he is and how he connects with others. Fournier echoes Deluca's sentiment: she felt it was necessary to be "vulnerable" in order to connect with others. Moreover, Fournier adds that despite not particularly enjoying the book, she felt that "in order to connect with *Infinite Jest* I had to make my blog posts personal by relating them to my life in some way." As these

responses indicate, auto/biographical writing in *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks' Summer* is a means of connecting to the other participants *and* to the novel, especially when that connection to the novel is a precarious one. Papacharissi argues that “[a]utobiographical statements include the presentation of private thoughts to a public setting as a way of creating a bond of intimacy with an imagined audience and simultaneously affirming the authenticity of the performance” (*Affective Publics* 109). She points out that there is a certain affect of auto/biography that simultaneously creates a bond among others because of the recognized risk of moving from private to public and establishes the authenticity of the self in relation to the group. The auto/biographical writing of the guides, then, is a means of reaching out to a public and gaining their trust, while also maintaining their sense of self and the values that they hold dear to them.

There are, however, cultural norms and authority figures that silence or curtail these values that individuals find important to their (sense of) self. As the discussions on gender and race revealed, the cultural norms of *Infinite Jest* are situated as primarily white, male, and cis-hetero. While auto/biography and the kinds of auto/biography that *Infinite Jest* coaxes can be a means of creating inclusivity, community, and providing more diverse perspectives, there are still moments of silencing and/or self-censoring. Writing about a YA online community, Rehberg Sedo makes a claim about this kind of tension that resonates with *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks' Summer*. She writes, “[t]he community is a site of subjection to group norms and authority figures and at the same time it is a site of active individual resistance to group norms and authority figures” (102). While there was no one authority figure in either of the *Infinite Jest* online groups, with all of the guides downplaying their authority on the subject, there were still individuals who claimed authority in the comments (and a few guests). And *Infinite Summer*, in particular, had the death of Wallace haunt the discussions, making critique and Wallace’s

authority a sensitive issue. Thus, the individual resistance that Rehberg points to often “hedges” and is usually presented politely. As she nicely puts it, “politeness masks ‘rules,’” even when those (cultural normative) rules are not explicit (103). These are “compositional strategies” that bloggers and commentators tacitly employ in order to maintain the community while sharing controversial opinions or statements (Morrison, “Compositional Strategies...” 287). Although Wallace, like Stein, sought a democratic poetics in his literature and language in order to focus on the “untrendy” aspects of American life, discussions and the self-censoring within these discussions put into question how successful his democratic project is. At the same time, however, the subsequent appearances of other online *Infinite Jest* reading groups draw a certain parallel with the aesthetics of Stein’s work. Just as Stein demands the agency of her readers to enter the text and make it their own, bringing to the text what is not there, the agency of readers in online *Infinite Jest* groups write themselves into the text and think through the text auto/biographically; they ground the narratives of *Infinite Jest* and outside the text—what is not represented in the text—in the life narratives of their own lives.

When Kathleen Fitzpatrick writes that Internet’s “many-to-many networks...can produce precisely the kinds of human relationship, the kinds of conversation, that Wallace’s vision of the novel meant to foster,” she echoes the techno-determinist enthusiasm of Rheingold and early proponents of the Internet’s “inherent” democratic capability (198). But read in a different way after my experience sifting through the comments in *Infinite Summer* and running my own *Infinite Jest* online reading group, Fitzpatrick still strikes a chord—but a different one—between the Internet’s and *Infinite Jest*’s democratic goals: the failure of its supposed inherency to afford democratic participation. And it is important that it is a failure that must be recognized, discussed, and acknowledged. As Rehberg Sedo argues, “All this is not to say that virtual book

clubs are utopian spaces. They are not. They illustrate the complexities of contemporary reading communities where vernacular reading practices are negotiated and normalized by the membership” (106). *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* demonstrate that *Infinite Jest* is not a one-size-fits-all hat. And *that* is valuable. Sure, the novel reflects on the fragmentary experience of late postmodernity and the Internet, exploring the relationships that emerge from or are a result of this fragmentary experience. And, as the affirmational auto/biographies demonstrate, *Infinite Jest*’s depiction of mental illness and addiction connects to many readers afflicted by mental illness and/or addiction. This is valuable, too. But the oppositional auto/biographies of *Infinite Jest* reading groups also stress the importance of unworking online and offline spaces to resist the idea and desire present in late postmodernity that community means “sameness.” Not only do oppositional auto/biographies allow for readers to connect to the novel and assert an identity that is not represented in the novel or poorly so, these auto/biographies also foreground the complexities (and none of them necessarily “elegant”) of reading *Infinite Jest* and the negotiation of the novel’s norms.

Moreover, the oppositional auto/biography makes these negotiations and the failures of the novel *public*, which in turn move these private thoughts into public conversations. For instance, the discussions of gender in *Infinite Jest* on *Poor Yoricks’ Summer* appeared in the Wallace-centered podcast *The Great Concavity* with Clare Hayes-Brady; 2017’s David Foster Wallace conference has called for sessions on gender, race, queer studies, and disability, all of which had been sorely lacking in previous iterations of that conference and other conferences or panels centered on Wallace; and, significantly, the International Society of David Foster Wallace released a “Statement on Equity and Inclusion” two months into its formation, and formed a

“Diversity Team” that publishes weekly articles on issues of diversity in Wallace studies.<sup>49</sup>

Bucher, the president of the society, states

Anyone who has participated in any sort of online discussion about David Foster Wallace and his writing will have noticed that most of the participants are white males. Let’s start this discussion there and say that we acknowledge that the small-but-burgeoning field of DFW Studies is not bursting with diversity. A glance at the list of Board members of our Society is no different—for now. (n.p.)

Of particular interest to me is his referral to “online discussion” and “white males” in the same sentence, which draws attention to the problems of white male enthusiasm about the internet I discussed in the previous chapter. Yet, as the last sentence indicates, Bucher is responding to the critiques made online of the society’s Board members being mostly white and male, which suggests that these critiques are becoming more public online than previously. Outside of Wallace studies, articles such as Deidre Coyle’s “Men Recommended David Foster Wallace to Me,” Jessa Crispin’s “Enough David Foster Wallace, already! We need to read beyond our bubbles,” and Jason Rhode’s “Why Insufferable People Love *Infinite Jest*” are addressing the aggressive and narrow-mindedness surrounding a majority of Wallace’s male readership, of which some of the affirmational auto/biographies or Nick Douglas’s guest post discussed in this chapter offer a glimpse of. I, myself, have not encountered this male readership, but these articles and similar discussions cause me to reflect on myself and my own recommendations, to think critically of my reading practices and the reading practices of others. These fundamental structural/institutional changes, online discussions, and calls for further discussion are occurring because of the increasing frequency of oppositional auto/biographies.

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<sup>49</sup> Significantly, all of these posts thus far are auto/biographical.



Just as Stein's recognition of her failure in *The Making of Americans* led her to more inclusive practices in her writing, the recognition of *Infinite Jest's* failures in these reading groups led to more inclusive approaches to the novel. This recognition is not Wallace's own in the novel, or at least it is not explicit as it is in Stein's own text. On this point, they do diverge. But Wallace increasingly shows greater attention to the reader in his short fiction following *Infinite Jest*. And like Stein, Wallace relies on the reader to enter the text *with* the author, an affective engagement of reciprocity between reader and author, as well as between readers. *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks' Summer* illuminate the various kinds of agency that readers take on while reading *Infinite Jest* and that this agency is granted through the means of auto/biographical thinking and writing. The two reading groups, and others like it, reflect *Infinite Jest's* argument about the importance of relational identity and vulnerability to the realization of community and the prevention of individualism and exclusionary practices. In order to connect with the novel and to others in the reading group, the self is affected and coaxed into writing auto/biographically by the novel's and others' narratives. Whether the writing is affirmational or oppositional, the self in these reading groups, as in the radio installation, is a networked self, produced by and performed in relation to the novel and all of those involved in the reading group and their affective reactions to the novel. Together, through the recognition of *Infinite Jest's* failures *and* its merits, readers arrive at the same conclusion that Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* points towards: there is no one book to capture the entirety of Americans' experiences; there is no all-encompassing grand "Everybody" narrative; to know "everybody," the process of identification and empathy, is an infinite task, always incomplete and vulnerable; an infinite attention to the other is required; and the self is relational, co-constructed by the people you meet, the media in which you participate, and in the books that you read.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

“Auto/biography, in its myriad forms, is a meaning-making process, one that seeks to understand the nature of subjectivity and experience in a cultural context” (Laurie McNeill 80)

I have presented auto/biography within 20th-Century American literature and mass media as a meaning-making process that seeks to understand the nature of subjectivity and experience in a cultural context *and* in a technological context. Or, to rephrase McNeill, a techno-cultural context. In the works of Stein and the works of Wallace, auto/biographical expressions are fundamental to creating the feeling of community and to a democratic participation in the text that decenters the author. True, not all of the works of Stein and the works of Wallace are auto/biographical, but the poetics and aesthetics of their work aim to elicit participation through the provocation of auto/biographical reactions, whether these reactions be oral or written, narratives or disclosures. Moreover, this auto/biographical form of participation in twentieth-century American literature partakes in a radio (for Stein) and an internet (for Wallace) imaginary, a democratic American imagination of the radio and internet that reconceived conceptions of individuality and community, and the relationship between author and reader. The imbrications of cultural, technological, literary conceptions of the self, I have asserted, is not a cause and effect relationship but a *mutual emergence*. Anna Poletti points out, “the need for closer attention to how mediation and media institutions contribute to the practice of autobiography is increasingly felt in the field” (Poletti, “What’s Next” 263). My attention to media and mediation in this dissertation queries “how the literary form itself might better reflect the felt intensities of modern communication” (Goble 20). I situated the felt intensities of the radio and the internet as an American site of struggle over democracy, identity, and mediation. The arrival of “mass media” with radio at the turn of the twentieth century in America coincided with an emerging American culture of celebrity autobiographies that are “dependent” on a

“democratic logic” (Rak *Boom!*, 32). Julie Rak writes, “the power of the connection for Americans between the representivity of democracy and the representivity of the self that Leigh Gilmore identifies as the heart of American autobiography [is] because in autobiography it is possible to ‘represent’ the self and have it stand in for the selves of others” (32). Auto/biography in America has had a long tradition of affective citizenship, the feeling of belonging to a public, community, or nation. My dissertation scratches the surface of this particular kind of attention to mediation and media institutions in auto/biography studies, but this dissertation contributes to the “need” that Poletti addresses.

Through the works of Stein and the works of Wallace, I have argued that the radio and the internet have significantly contributed to notions of relationality, thereby modernizing (or reconceiving) notions of community, democratic participation and access, and individual identity. For auto/biography studies, this blurring is especially appropriate because of “its disorienting qualities and its lines of flight” (Rak “Derailment” 164). The introduction of the radio reconceived the relationship of public and private life; public addresses created private intimacies and private intimacies were being broadcast to the public. The internet continued the blurring of those boundaries, creating a fluidity between private and public, but increasing the number of individuals whose private lives can be broadcasted. The cultural and literary responses to the blurring of public and private life either reinforce individualism as a means of protecting a sense of individuality or embrace the relationality and vulnerability to affirm a relational notion of the self. Although the sequential structure of my dissertation may suggest a teleological progression from the radio to the internet, I must stress that my dissertation does not present a teleological argument. My juxtapositions of radio and Modernism with the internet and Late Postmodernism is an archeological “cut,” in the media archeological spirit of Siegfried Zielinski

and Lori Emerson. These “cuts” critique techno-determinist notions of technological progress and expose the shared protocols (cultural and technological) of radio and the internet. For my dissertation in particular, I exposed and drew similarities between American radio’s and internet’s imaginaries of democracy, identity, and community that the blurring of private and public life contributed to. These similarities force us to re-evaluate what is “new” about the internet (and new media in general) and to recognize an American cultural and literary trend in the twentieth century of attaching hope and promise in a mass medium’s potential in creating a means of eliciting democratic action and involvement.

But in juxtaposing the similarities between the radio and the internet, I was careful to avoid arguing that the two media are the same. Radio and the internet alike are each made up of medium-specific cultural, historical, and literary affordances and constraints, affects and effects, and contexts. One of the major (but not the sole) contribution to Modernism’s blurring of private and the public life is radio’s aurality. The new aurality of sonic modernity contained tensions between authoritarian control via a central broadcasting location/institution and egalitarian inclusion of a diversity of voices via the early localism of American broadcasting. I illuminated these tensions by situating Stein’s radio imaginary with Italy’s fascist control over and imaginary of radio, Britain’s centralized, “democratic” dissemination radio model and the dialogic radio imaginary of the Bloomsbury group, and, of course, the localism and localist imaginary of American radio. For the majority of the 1910s and for most of the 1920s, the American broadcasting system embraced the democratic potential of radio through the decentralized control of local stations and hobbyists. But as radio users began to increase, the American government sought a similar model to the British, one that asserts central control to democratically distribute cultural material. The American FCC’s policies and actions led to

increasing standardization and homogenization by the 1930s, suppressing marginalized groups on the air, inching out hobbyists from the ether, and favouring large broadcasters. I argued that American writers who experimented with aurality/orality in their writing worked towards keeping alive the diversity and inclusivity that radio had introduced in American lives. With Stein in particular, the orality/aurality of Stein's work is meant to invite, rather than exclude, individuals' unique voices into the text. To put it one way, Stein's works are a system that keeps itself open to the "chaos" rather than attempting to contain and control that chaos. My critical media project, "Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*," illuminates that very "system" of Stein's text, while also contributing to my argument that *Everybody's Autobiography's* engages with and responds to America's increasingly homogenized sonic modernity.

Following Modernist engagements with radio, American Late Postmodernists revive the techno-cultural desire to promote and encourage dialogical engagement amongst citizens and between authors and readers via a new mass medium, in this case, the internet. American cyberenthusiasts believed that the internet is *the* communication medium vital to democracy, and American authors were incorporating a dialogical appeal into their written, book-bound texts. Both American authors and internet enthusiasts conceived this dialogical appeal as a means of disrupting capitalism and the kinds of "corporatization of language" that loomed (Emerson 179). But rather than an aural/oral immediacy between individuals, the internet afforded (and authors sought techniques to include) a dialogical immediacy to written text. I argued that the internet and its communication models (BBSs, IRC, and listservs) afforded interactive writing, while literature sought to write in interactivity. The rhetoric of cyberenthusiasts, however, is techno-determinist, attributing a democratic inherency to the internet rather than acknowledging the work that goes into community building and democratic deliberation. Cyberenthusiasts often

imagine the internet as a separate space from the real world and privilege a white, and mostly male, subjectivity, disregarding the marginalized communities that exist online. While Wallace's work emphasizes the integral ties between embodiment, vulnerability, and community, participants in *Poor Yoricks' Summer* and *Infinite Summer* push discussions surrounding the white male subjectivity privileged in that text. The online engagement with *Infinite Jest*, whether it be through blog posts or videos of an individual eating the novel's pages, keeps the novel vulnerable to critique. As much as fans of Wallace may gripe that Wallace is being unfairly "attacked," these engagements are producing the kinds of interactions with literature that Wallace wrote about, prompting conversations around diversity and creating a more inclusive approach to the American canon of literature.

Whereas I situated Stein and Wallace within the technological protocols of Modernist radio and Late Postmodernist internet, respectively, in Chapters 2 and 4, I then represented the auto/biographical engagements of Stein's and Wallace's respective readers through critical media projects in Chapters 3 and 5. These critical media projects—"Everybody's *Everybody's Autobiography*" and *Poor Yoricks' Summer*—foreground the affective intensities of Stein's work and Wallace's work that coax and coach auto/biographical response and interaction, contributing to feelings of community. Auto/biographical response, in the works of Stein and the works of Wallace, is a twentieth-century means of navigating the increased sociality that mass media introduced and maintaining a sense of self. These auto/biographical acts in the poetics of Stein and the aesthetics of Wallace are not to be construed as closing the self from others but as maintaining a "witness" among others, in which "being with" connotes differentiation and not sameness. The risk of maintaining a sense of self and being vulnerable to others in the mass media landscape of radio and the internet create an affective tension. The works of Stein and the

works of Wallace attempts to channel that affect towards democratic feeling, a feeling of simultaneous vulnerability and self-preservation that creates community. Those attempts, as I have demonstrated, have sometimes ended in failure, but that failure leads to further conversation for authors and readers. Moreover, auto/biography in the twentieth century is no longer limited to celebrity cultures, but to everyday individuals. Indeed, auto/biography before the twentieth century was not always limited to celebrity figures, as Rak makes clear with the origins of memoirs (*Boom!*). But when Stein writes that “autobiography is easy for any one” (4) and “everybody will do theirs” (1), she realizes the kinds of auto/biographical acts that everybody does to navigate the soundscape of radio’s sonic modernity. In many ways, Stein anticipates the memoir boom of the 90s, of which Wallace reflects on in *The Pale King*, and the blogs, tweets, snaps, and Facebook posts of digital auto/biography in social media.

The significant relation of auto/biographical acts to an increasingly interconnected world have taken hold of the Late Postmodernist imagination. As aforementioned, Wallace’s unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, engages with the memoir boom and even presents itself as a memoir. The novel gestures to an increasing trend of experimenting with the memoir genre that has been labeled “autofiction” (Worthington). Critics largely associate the emergence of autofiction with Early Postmodern French literature in the 1970s, Margurite Duras being prominently mentioned or the focus of analysis (Hugueny-Léger; Jordan; Simoglou). While the recent limelight of autofiction points to Karl Ove Knausgård’s recent six volume *My Struggle*, other key works of autofiction since the 1990s include Cookie Mueller’s *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*, Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick*, Teju Cole’s *Open City*, Tao Lin’s novels, Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?*, Ben Lerner’s novels, Nell Zink’s *The Wallkeeper*, and a section of Zadie Smith’s *NW* features autofictional techniques. The appeal of

autofiction is a Late Postmodern one. Autofiction stresses the connection between fiction and the real world, concretizing the author as a human being in the real world and literature as a form of communication *with* the reader in that world. Moreover, autofiction challenges Lionel Trilling's conception that authenticity and sincerity are separate, competing modes of engagement because autofiction searches for authenticity and wishes to communicate that authenticity to others and in a sincere manner; its goal is simultaneously self-expression and other-directed communication.

On one hand, the emerging trend of autofiction responds to the memoir boom of the nineties that continues to dominate the book industry today. And because of such controversies as James Frey's fabrications in *A Million Little Pieces*, the memoir boom soon signalled to the public that memoirs always contain some element of fiction. As Wallace stresses in *The Pale King*, the fictionalized elements of memoirs are the result of legal procedures and the subjectivity of the author, that the very *act of writing is self-expression* but it is a public (other directed) form of self-expression (*The Pale King* 66-73). On the other hand, autofiction and autofictional techniques employed in literature emerge with the internet's blurring between public and private life, putting the private life of individuals into the public sphere of the internet. Reflecting on the poor reception of her autofictional work, *I Love Dick*, in 1996 and then the praise it received in 2006 when it was reissued, Chris Kraus understands the internet as partly responsible for this change of heart in the public and critical reception of her work. She writes,

This time, the book was championed, not reviled, for its 'invasion of privacy'. A new generation of young women had already wholeheartedly rejected these rules.... it seemed like internet culture was collapsing the boundaries between professional and amateur writing and criticism, and this collapse favoured girls ("The New Universal").



Kraus is careful not to be technologically deterministic. She does not attribute the internet with causing the recent trends in fictional literature to include personal, private details that collapsed the boundaries between fiction and reality. Instead, she notes that internet *culture* (not the internet itself) contributes to and is a part of this trend in fictional literature to include personal, private details. Further, Kraus emphasizes the women behind this movement, which is significantly important considering a google search of “autofiction” will highlight the works of Knausgård and Lerner but disregard much of the autofiction by women in the 1990s.

Whether it be radio *culture* or internet *culture*, Kraus’s statement draws attention to the significant role of auto/biographical acts in literature’s engagement with mass media communications technologies. Specifically, for Stein and for the readers of Wallace, auto/biographical acts in the spaces of new media can challenge the protocols that exclude marginalized groups. As Julie Rak argues, “Life-writing approaches tend to assume that lives matter and have a politics of representation. These approaches could be helpful within new-media studies” (Rak “Derailment” 165). In my critical media project, “Everybody’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*,” the contributors’ readings demonstrate Stein’s poetics of “abstraction” (as William Carlos Williams puts it), which removed grammatical imposition in the text to afford the voice of the reader rather than enforce the voice of a white American author. The politics of representation in Stein’s work is oral/aural and becomes heard when read by others, which is why I stressed the importance of listening beyond Stein’s own recordings (although those have value, too). But to be clear, Stein’s poetics of abstraction is not the only means of challenging radio’s standardization and can be problematic because of its textual representation of abstraction. For instance, black American author Zora Neale Hurston textually represents black American voices and folklore throughout her texts (and was criticized for it by white and black

critics and authors). Moreover, Lynn Domina argues that the “distinctions between ethnography and autobiography are [significantly] suspect” in Hurston’s earlier work (197). She writes,

Although many literary autobiographies convey an individual's acquisition of subjectivity through literacy, through writing subjectivity into a text, Hurston resists this tradition because her subjectivity has been previously constructed through the orality of folklore. Much of what gets written down here is less an attempt to discover or create a self by textualizing personal memory than it is an attempt to reproduce the stories that Hurston identifies with herself because she has been told them. (197-8)

Domina points out that Hurston’s work blends auto/biography and ethnography as a means of preserving the oral folklore of Black Americans, communicating her black American identity through that orality and situating herself within that community. While not directly related to radio, these texts were written in the 1930s and early 1940s when radio standardization was at its peak and the American airwaves were becoming increasingly homogenized. Thus, it is significant that Hurston was one of the very few black American writers who textually emphasized and foregrounded black American voices and the stories they tell during this time period, as it was a textual preservation of black voices when radio’s auralty was silencing these voices. So, whereas Stein’s poetics is abstract, Hurston’s poetics is specific. But both writers work towards a poetics of democratic inclusion through the orality/aurality of their texts: Stein, through her attempt to include all voices without critique or judgement; Hurston, through her preservation of black Americans’ oral culture when that culture is being silenced.

In comparison, Wallace’s democratic aesthetics include “untrendy” stories, narratives which largely surround mental health and addiction that have been (and still are) largely

stigmatized. Many readers identify with these narratives and respond with affirmational auto/biographies that affirm Wallace's depictions of mental health and addiction. But Wallace's writing also elicit oppositional auto/biographical writing: "untrendy" critiques of his work from readers, which allows for further critiques to be made in public spaces. By writing affirmational and oppositional narratives or disclosures, readers enact Wallace's arguments for paying attention to others, being involved with others, and embracing the differential composition of community. In *Infinite Summer* and *Poor Yoricks' Summer*, the topics of mental health and addiction in Wallace's *Infinite Jest* are valuable to readers because reading and discussing the novel open a safe space for conversations around mental health and addiction. But other auto/biographical utterances also foregrounded the white male bias of Wallace's novel and the poor representation of black Americans in that novel. These critiques have made scholars and the Wallace community more critically aware of Wallace's work. And more, these critiques of Wallace have moved discussion of Late Postmodernism beyond Wallace and white men. Much of the scholarship on "what comes after postmodernism" focuses primarily on white male authors, and if women or writers of colour are included it is only as a footnote, a brief gesture, or as part of a conclusion. From my experience, and through my research, the conversations online surrounding Wallace's work productively encourage readers to read more diversely. These readers may not altogether stop reading Wallace, but they are, it seems, making more time to read writers of colour and women writers.

However, I realize that I have also fallen into the very same pitfalls that I critiqued of Late Postmodernist scholarship. My focus has been on two white American authors, and my inclusion of writers of colour is sorely lacking. My awareness of my dissertation's faults points me towards further research that I am excited to begin. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, there is very

little research on American writers and their engagement with radio, with criticism's attention being predominantly white and male authors. Moving forward, I am researching black Modernist American authors' engagement with radio and sonic modernity. Criticism of black Modernist American writers have mostly focused on recorded music. But to take Ralph Ellison's "Living with Music," for instance, scholars overlook the fact that the first medium to quiet the noisy chaos of his apartment is a radio and *later* a record player (10). So far, Jennifer Lynn Stoeber's *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* is the only book that I have come across that discusses the history of black Americans and radio *and* how black American authors engaged with and/or challenged the culture and imaginary of radio. And Sarah Wilson, in the same "Gertrude Stein and Radio" essay, points out, "Blackface programs like *Amos 'n' Andy* worked to stabilize this point of slippage by instating dialect as a marker of blackness, but figures like White, Hughes and Wright undermined this aural regime by self-identifying as black while not sounding like either Amos or Andy. Radio's gift to the mid-century formulation of race was aural confusion" (274-5). Wilson gestures to one way black American writers challenged the standardization of American radio in the late 1920s and 1930s by sounding unlike the stereotypes on the radio. However, as mentioned above, Zora Neale Hurston's presentation of black speech as dialect in text throughout her work radically departs from her Black American peers. This tension between black American writers representing black voice, sounding black voice, and being black on the radio begs further research. Doing so, broadens the complexity and understanding of the American modernist soundscape and sonic modernity in general.

Another area of focus that I wish to pursue is contributing to the concept of Late Postmodernism, and to have a more intersectional survey of the field. This may only be an essay or a book length study, but I wish to draw attention to and address the scholarship that often

dismisses or undermines the work of people of colour and women when theorizing and discussing “what comes after postmodernism.” The intersectional book that has been directly informative for my work on thinking through postmodernism’s shift in the 1990s is Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, which treats postmodernism as still existing but having an affect of cruel optimism, a wanting of affect and affective attachments. As I argued in Chapter 4, postmodernism has not “ended”; instead, the early Postmodernist techniques of self-referentiality and play have been adapted towards a wanting of affect and attachments rather than a waning of affect and disconnection. Continuing the techno-cultural research of the early internet, I am interested in researching marginalized groups on the early internet (such as the Black, LGBTQIA+, and indigenous BBSs that I mentioned in Chapter 4). Similar to chapters 4 and 5, I aim to illuminate the involvements of writers of colour within these early online communities while also thinking through how writers of colour engage with present-day communities such as Black Twitter.

Central to these future projects will be auto/biography and affect theory because of my interest in how a medium affects individuals to respond auto/biographically, whether that auto/biographical act is an utterance or a book-length auto/biography. People write auto/biographically to understand their own position in a broader techno-cultural context, as well as members of various communities. My work suggests that auto/biographical writing can be coached and coaxed by new technological contexts—radio, or the participatory internet, in this case—that afford and constrain self-expression and community formation. In America, auto/biography contains these affective tensions between glorifying the solo acts of the individuals, the story of a self-made individual, and the individual as part of a community or communities that comprise of a nation. But I have also demonstrated the ways in which

auto/biography challenges the kinds of stereotypes or standardization that American mass media employ. In Stein's work explicitly and in Wallace's work indirectly, auto/biography can be redefined as simultaneously an act of self-preservation and of community-building. But their work may be too general, a little too abstract (and perhaps this worked in Stein's favour more than it did in Wallace's). So, in moving forward, I would like to situate a variety of American writers who lean more to the specific and emphasize subjective experience, locating the American concept (and perhaps its critique) of community and democracy in the individual experience.

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