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THE ANXIOUS SHADOW OF A COLDWAR: AFFECT, BIOPower & 
RESISTANCE IN FICTION & CULTURE IN THE PERIOD OF INTRA-ANXIETY 
1989-2001 

by 

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A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial 
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Don DeLillo’s 1997 novel *Underworld* stands as the framing text for this study of fiction, cultural affect, and resistance in the later part of the 1980’s – the exhausted, waning years of the Cold War – and the 1990’s, the period immediately following its collapse. DeLillo’s book is situated in the 1990’s, a period of what I term “intra-anxiety” following the Cold War and prior to the attacks of September 11\(^{th}\) and the ensuing “War on Terror.” The Cold War had provided an organizing myth for America and American culture, absorbing and structuring anxieties and governing affect. “The Cold War, it gave you a reason to get up in the morning,” said John Updike in *Rabbit at Rest*. DeLillo seems to have thought so; his oeuvre is, in many ways, dedicated to its excavation, and *Underworld* is his final autopsy. The book casts its glance backward from the 1990’s through to the 1950’s. A specter – of a childhood in the Bronx, of an atomic bomb with apocalyptic designs, of a baseball and baseball game, and the lost world they represent – haunts from behind. A specter of waste and anxiety hangs over the present. A nebulous
threat looms in the future: “an unseen something haunts the day.” (DeLillo, 1). The hazy image of the World Trade Center adorns the cover of *Underworld*.

Part 1 focuses on the novel itself, attentive to three broad theoretical lenses. The first draws on the work of Michel Foucault. The Biopolitical/Disciplinary lens provides a vocabulary for thinking through myriad forms of discipline – on both population and individual levels – in the book. If we scratch below the sometimes fuzzy, if productive term “postmodernism” that governed the theoretical discourse of the era, we find specific neoliberal policies – a fiscal crisis in the 1970’s, an evisceration of the working class and postwar American prosperity – that usher in the new realities of neoliberal consumerism, the “Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” described by Fredric Jameson. The second theoretical node draws on affect theory and Derrida’s work on the spectral. Harnessing the work of Lauren Berlant, Derrida, and others, I explore how nostalgia and affect govern the psychic lives of individual characters in *Underworld* and in the culture at large. The third broad theoretical lens is spatial. Postmodern Critical Geographers – such as David Harvey and Edward Soja – provide language for thinking through the text spatially. The novel starts with a ball game, an outdoor event that symbolizes the last moment of a certain notion of an American self that will haunt the rest of the book – most explicitly in the form as the baseball itself.

Part 2 considers the way that fiction writers think about the role of the novel/writer in light of postmodernism during the 1980’s and 1990’s. I look at the essays of David Foster Wallace and of Jonathan Franzen and others in Harper's magazine that worry over the role of fiction and fiction reading and that consider the role not only of the novelist but of the reading public. Part 2 of the project asks the question of whether the
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novel can play a significant role in a consumer, postmodern culture – if it can, in short, be a form of resistance.

Part 3, thus, turns its glance more specifically to the question of resistance. I look at punk/ DIY youth cultural movements, specifically the musical subcultures of hardcore and punk that sought to build alternative economies of circulation, separate and apart from corporate neoliberal consumer networks.
Acknowledgements:

To say that Steven Kruger was “helpful” or “invaluable” or “a pleasure to work with” would be a comical understatement. He’s been a Sherpa. His generosity has been jaw-drop enormous. He’s guided my thoughts, he’s nudged gently, and his intellectual generosity is as striking as his patience, not to mention his time. He’s a sharp, close reader and a sagely thought partner. It’s been joy.
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Introduction: Biopolitical Affect and the Intra-Anxiety Period

“I miss it … the Cold War, it gave you a reason to get up in the morning,” Samuel Cohen quotes John Updike’s *Rabbit at Rest* in his 2009 book, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990’s*. Cohen argues that the decade saw an explosion of historical novels that reacted to the “triumphalist reception” of the Cold War’s end. My project also seeks to periodize, interrogate, and explore this peculiar moment of cultural affect in the 1990’s, a time that Cohen says looks like an “interwar decade” and what I will term a period of “intra-anxiety,” marked by the collapse of the framing narrative of the Cold War on one end and September 11, 2001, with its ushering in of a War on Terror, on the other. This is a period best understood through a particular register of collective anxiety; haunted by specters of the past and the future and helpfully understood through the lens of Affect Theory and of Michel Foucault’s Biopower.

To frame this project I will examine Don DeLillo’s 1997 novel *Underworld*. Truly an operatic book in both depth and breadth, *Underworld* presents a cross-section of the emotional core of postwar American life, but it is a meditation on and from a specific temporal moment – the 1990’s. DeLillo posits a specter of ephemeral, nameless, right-around-the-corner threat. Indeed he has, throughout his career – beginning in the 1970’s and continuing to the present –written about terrorism and about the Cold War. In works such as *The Names, Mao II, Libra, and White Noise*, the strange cultural work of the Cold War and the threat of terrorism loom large; paranoia and anxiety run throughout the era and DeLillo’s oeuvre. The Cold War, however, had given shape and name for structuring and understanding our collective anxiety, and after its collapse, an “enemy crisis” emerged; the governing narrative logic for our anxiety left us rudderless and left ghostly
ruins in its wake, “a population of ghosts, with or without people … a community with or without a leader … a specter animated by spirit,” in Derrida’s words (2). At base, the Cold War narrative is governed by biopolitical logics and, we’ll see, increasingly, beginning in the 1970’s with the fiscal crisis and the rise of globalization, those biopolitical interests are by the 1990’s driven by a neoliberal agenda. The World Trade Center, which adorns Underworld’s cover in a (ghostly) mist, is a symbol of this era of the neoliberal that was beginning and that, as it would turn out, became a symbol of the new enemy.

The colliding of the real and the fictional in DeLillo adds weight to the intersecting concepts at work here – the loss of the enemy of the Cold War but the ongoingness of felt-threat – the assertion that this threat is governed by a biopolitics that is, in the time we are concerned with, driven by neoliberalism.

Klara, one of a host of Underworld’s many characters, is an artist from the old neighborhood in the Bronx where our protagonist, Nick Shay, grew up. A “ghost” from his past, Klara watches the World Trade Center go up during her “rooftop summer” of 1974 and it seems to follow her everywhere; it’s “a very terrible thing, but you have to look” (372). Throughout the summer Klara sits on her roof, she gazes at the city as the day fades and “the power-company smokestacks blow ‘gorgeous poisons.’” Repeatedly, while Klara sits on her rooftop – throughout Part 4 of the book - she notices “gorgeous poisons” of one sort or another; “poisoned air” floats the name of a woman penned in the air by a skywriter, the aesthetics of nebulous threat. This “poisoned air” is indeed a reoccurring motif in DeLillo’s work, most notably in White Noise where threat in the form of a nebulous Toxic Airborn Event also underwrites the book. Poisons in the air can
be seen, therefore, as a gaseous, quasi-embodiment, ghostly, like Derrida’s “specter,” of threat. The mist that covers the image of the World Trade Center on the cover of *Underworld* not only renders the buildings strange, “ghostly,” it seems to foreshadow a day when they would, in fact, disappear into a cloud of smoke and a new era, one governed by Hot War rhetoric (“a mushroom cloud”). Of course this Hot War, too, more than any before it, would be underwritten by neoliberalism, private interests that result in the very real power to “let live or make die,” in Foucault’s phrase. Beyond this, the mist de-tethers the sense of time in the image of the buildings and this too is significant. The “intra-anxiety” of the 1990’s is both located at a specific moment and governed simultaneously by the past and the present. *Underworld*’s narrative structure – beginning in prologue, fast-forwarding to the present of the 1992, and then back-tracking through the Cold War, more or less decade by decade, and ending with a metaphorical disappearance into the cyberspace (a specter of its own) of the future – replays this simultaneity of past and present. We see a temporal affect in the novel that is anxious, destabilized, and haunted.

Rebecca Wanzo has summed up some of the current thinking on affect in a review of recently published seminal texts. Wanzo cites Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s 1995 collection of Silvan Tomkin’s work, *Shame and Its Sisters*, as opening up affect – previously the province of psychology and psychoanalysis – to cultural studies and providing a “framework for discussing the relationship of biological response and ideology, of emotion to social construction…. Cultural studies projects about affect are … always about emotion or feeling *plus*: plus liberalism, plus biopower, plus nationalism, plus any articulation of ideology in action” (Wanzo, 967-968, 998). Affect can be, Wanzo
points out, a moving target. It’s a nebulous and flexible term taken up in the service of myriad projects, many thick with specialized critical vocabularies sweeping through diverse ontological orientations from philosophy to psychoanalysis to neurology. It can thus be a rather opaque sticky-web to traverse. As Gregg and Seigworth suggest: “Perhaps one of the surest things that can be said of both affect and its theorization is that they will exceed, always exceed the context of their emergence, as the excess of ongoing process” (Gregg & Seigworth, 1). However affect theory is employed, it has been focused on political, pragmatic, and performative ends and thus provides an opening for considering the ways in which biopower operate in an emotional, affective, register. “Whatever affect consistently is in recent studies,” says Wanzo, “it is about the relationship between emotion and state power.” Affect theory offers us an emergent set of discursive tools to explore how technological and cultural changes in the twentieth century have transformed emotional life at both an individual scale and a large, population scale and the tools to think critically through the pragmatic and political ends to which this may be deployed. Affect, operating on a preconscious level, can serve as a a visceral indicator of threat (Wanzo) as it does in DeLillo’s 1984 novel *White Noise*. It is affect that is, according to Ben Anderson, “precisely what is targeted, intensified and modulated in new forms of power ... [such as biopower and] ... modulated through multiple techniques of power and known through multiple forms of knowledge” (Anderson, 164-5), and it is affect, according to Seigworth, that drives us toward thought. Among the forms of knowledge to which Anderson alludes is systems theory.
“Systems theory” is best understood, says Tom LeClair, “as a set of assumptions about nature and as an interpretive methodology – as a metascience ... the subjects of systems theory are all living systems, including social systems and the specialized disciplines that study them” (3). Systems theory is concerned not only with the processes of life but the essential relations among seemingly isolated parts of the ecosystem. Systems have a number of characteristics: living (open) systems are dynamic; they are reciprocal; they must be considered as a whole. Closed systems can be analyzed with mechanistic principles. Open systems are goal-seeking, self-organizing, they are flexible, adaptable, self-correcting. All systems are information-carriers and systems theory seeks to provide a paradigm for thinking about reality.

Michel Foucault was a philosopher of the “history of systems of thought” and indeed understanding the intricate workings of systems was his underlying project. He disavowed universals, and he claimed that he was not interested in clean theories, yet his overarching project was to unearth systems of power. The tools that he used to excavate how power functions were always relational, always operating within a dynamic ecosystem in which every player is complicit. Rather than simply name how the power, discipline, and surveillance operate within the prison system, he sought to delineate the systemic closed system within which it functioned, an economy of discipline, a panopticon. Foucault traces the “genealogy” – also a system – of punishment as it became “an economy of suspended rights” in the eighteenth century: “a whole army of technicians took over from the executioner ... warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists” (Discipline & Punish, 11), all operating within a
bureaucratic ecosystem, in a relation to one another and the subject in a dance of power and surveillance. Every one of Foucault’s formulations of history and culture, power and knowledge relations is predicated on a self-regulating logical system that disciplined its subjects: Discourse, Panopticism, Microphysics of Power, Biopower, Governmentality, the Apparatus.

Foucault was interested in “sets of practices” that mark reality. So too is systems theory. When Foucault turns to his exploration of biopolitics, governmentality, and the apparatus, he says that the purpose of all his “investigations concerning madness, disease, delinquency, sexuality ... is to show how the coupling of a set of practice [a system] and a regime of truth form an apparatus of knowledge-power that effectively marks out in reality that which does not exist” (The Birth of Biopolitics, 19). Affect exists at this register, somewhere in-between, sensed, emotional, preconscious, apprehended, and susceptible – “precisely what is targeted, intensified and modulated in new forms of power,” as Anderson suggests, by the apparatus.

Biopower seeks to understand how this apparatus functions to discipline at a population level and in this paper I assert that this is done not simply through the set of governmental, scientific, medical, and juridical practices that Foucault names but also at a more ephemeral and perhaps more insidious level, an affective level. Jackie Orr suggests the term “psychopower” for “technologies of power and techniques of knowledge developed by a normalizing society to regulate the psychological life, health, and disorders of individuals and entire populations” (Orr, 11). It is here that biopower meets affect. Psychopower intensifies and multiplies communicative feedback loops; it functions by “multiplying the possible surfaces of contact between psychic processes and
their regulation and by legitimating power itself as a kind of therapeutic activity.” It exists, according to Orr, at its most pronounced, in the psychic life of panic, a panic that occurs in both individual and collective space.

Systems theory has had a profound influence of many contemporary novelists, in particular a strain of postmodern novelists known as “systems novelists.” The novel, after all, is a closed system, self-regulating by its own internal logics. Systems theory offers novelists a paradigm to engage with this explicitly, a theoretical paradigm for exploring hypothetical formations of wholes, formal equivalents of dense bodies of living data. Indeed, the generation of young writers at work in the 1990’s grew up with the systems novel, cut their teeth on DeLillo, and consumed an American diet of TV, nihilism, postmodern theory, the final exhausted yawn of the Cold War and its last moments of apocalyptic dread. These writers, who began their careers in the 1980’s and 1990’s, spent quite a bit of time worrying over the state of the novel, the state of America, the state of the American reader, and “What Fiction Does.” They published articles with names like “Why Bother?” “… Television and U.S. Fiction,” “Fiction Futures of the Conspicuously Young.” They vented their worries within conspicuously young title forums like “The Future of Fiction” in The Review of Contemporary Fiction. They would eventually conclude that fiction is ultimately “a solution, the best solution, to the problem of existential solitude” (Franzen, Further Away, 42), but on the road to articulating such a universal and temporally indifferent sentiment there were years of unpacking what it meant to be a young writer in the 1980’s and 1990’s (a totally exhausted time, according to Christian Slater in the iconic 1990 teen film, Pump up the Volume). The second part of my project will turn not to the work of these novelists but to their worried conversation
about the affect of their generation and the state of the novel.

It’s my hope that in so doing, we bring together the two converging strands of the project – the fictional and the real – and think more deeply about how they illuminate one another and the complex cultural moment that we are seeking to inscribe.
Part I:

Arrangement in Grey & Black: Affective Haunting & Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*

Samuel Cohen notes the difference between the levels of anxiety in Cold War and post-Cold War America, as explained by the immediacy of the threat – the distant violence of the 1990’s – a time that saw a ratcheting up of the global blood pressure, the Cold War turned hot, but taking place a world away. Cohen argues that the return of mortal and immediate threat in the wake of September 11th accounts for the return of the kind of fear and resulting rhetoric that characterized the Cold War and allows us to see “the 1990’s as a time between wars, between times characterized by fear of threat to America, and as a result, as a time moment during which it became perhaps more possible for some to … examine the binary orientation such fear encourages and the resulting narrative constructions of the past such orientation makes possible” (6). Cohen’s study explores writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Phillip Roth, and Toni Morrison who were at a point in their lives that encouraged a retrospection that coincided with the nation’s post-Cold War moment and a national retrospection. It is in this literary milieu that *Underworld* is published. Significantly, Cohen notes a commonality in the way in which these novels weave together various periods, reimagining one through the other, and through the present (11-12). This type of temporal collapse is central to the structure and to the pulse of *Underworld*, which begins in the present – the 1990’s – moves backward, retracing the years of the Cold War, and ends again in the 1990’s. The effect, therefore, is an archeological excavation of the genealogy of the Cold War that positions “it” with a spectral presence in a haunted present.
Indeed, Cohen posits that the 1990’s saw a particular preoccupation with the past. He cites the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1991, when President George H. W. Bush’s rhetoric illustrated the shape of the cultural narrative of the Cold War as it was ushered into a historical context. Cohen quotes Bush, “Now we stand triumphant … there is no enemy menacing our security.” The triumph here – of American Capitalist ideology against the USSR and Communism – left “America with an enemy crisis” (80), according to Todd Gitlen (qtd. Cohen, 9). For years the “Communist threat” consisted of a nuclear, apocalyptic, atomic threat, and of course, a threat to capitalism; indeed, the threat to capitalism and nuclear threat were deeply enmeshed. Perhaps no one crystalized this more clearly than Reagan whose rhetoric of nuclear disaster and the Communist Other blended seamlessly in the 1980’s with domestic threat, Crack Whores, and Welfare Queens, an uptick in urban blight, and with the onset of the AIDS epidemic that birthed an agile specter, an apocalyptic narrative, and a culture of fear that saturated the affect of the 1980’s. Given this, it is logical that the fear didn’t just evaporate following the Cold War’s end. What is left is a rudderless anxious affect – the race-y heart, let-down feel of misplaced anticipation, the phone ringing and it is, alas, not the Big News call that you were anticipating – that saturated the culture.

*The Shot(s) Heard Around the World*

*Underworld* begins in prologue, on October 3, 1951, at a baseball game. The Brooklyn Dodgers played the Brooklyn Giants at the Brooklyn Polo Grounds. It was the first baseball game ever to be televised and as such it ushered in a new era in American Life. A move indoors; despite the “blood loyalty” to team, the stands, in DeLillo’s
framing, are empty, “twenty thousand empty seats” (15). The Giants would win the game. Third baseman Bobby Thompson hit a 3-run homer clinching the pennant in what would be known as “the shot heard around the world.” In DeLillo’s telling of the story, J. Edgar Hoover was among the assembled. Another shot was heard that day and it would also would usher in American Reality: the Cold War... The book, according to DeLillo, was inspired by the front page of the New York Times:

I … found the front page for The New York Times the day after the ball game, Oct. 4, 1951.... The second headline across the page was ‘Soviets explode nuclear bomb.’ I saw these two headlines, literally, in a pictorial way, the way they were matched, each followed by three columns of type, and of course some sort of historical resonance taking place. Bobby Thompson’s home run became known immediately as the ‘Shot heard ‘round the world,’ which was a kind of American vanity, assuming that everyone in the world was aware of this ballgame. This got me started on Underworld.

Figure 1

1 The New York Times, October 4, 1951
The 1980’s and 1990’s saw a development of a queer theoretical discourse that sought to challenge and redescribe teleological assumptions and spatial practices. This work by, among others, Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam provides generative language for thinking through Underworld’s temporality, its anxious teleology, and its looming millennial apocalyptic threat, with its haunted present and collapsed temporal boundaries that are illustrative too of the “schizophrenic” nature of postmodernism.

In the mid-1980’s there was a collective affective exhaustion, and a new plague with apocalyptic stakes emerged. Postmodernism is, in Stanton B. Garner’s words “deeply informed by the rhetoric and psychosocial preoccupations of Cold War millenarianism” (175).

The liminal space, created by “rupture,” the “anorexic ruins” diagnosed by Baudrillard and others, “without horizon and without hope,” represents not only a collapse of teleological master narrative but of specific organizing cultural myths. Angels in America, Garner says, is “caught between apocalypses, contemplating the end of a century that has ... already outlived itself” (178). This space grows more pronounced after the collapse of the Cold War and, retrospectively, after The War on Terror, representing another apocalypse. In a “sense ... 1989 stands as a terminal point, the end of an era. With the year 2000 still on the horizon” (Garner, 178). Apocalypse here functions as an organizing myth that does important cultural work and the collapse of one apocalypse and the liminal space created in its rupture ushers in an affective anxiety that is a critical register for the cultural work.

With the invention of the atomic bomb a new kind of disaster-scale threat was born. A new kind of “specific” intellectual, according to Foucault, in the form of an “atomic
expert” (or more particularly still, Robert Oppenheimer) alone had the scientific knowledge to annihilate the world (Foucault, 1984, 64). Atomic threat changed the psychic life of the culture. A new kind of potential psychopower, in Orr’s words, was consequently born. Orr, in her book *Panic Diaries* explores the panic around the 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast in considering mass-scale hysteria, citing the new social space created by radio. This comes into a new kind of stark relief in the wake of actual nuclear threat, and its subsequent equally apocalyptic iterations.

*Underworld’s* prologue, *The Triumph of Death*, sets up the affective and historical scope of the novel. It is deeply rooted in the past, deeply concerned with the making of history. “[L]onging on a large scale is what makes history,” says DeLillo on page one, “but this is just a kid with a local yearning,” and we are introduced to the kind of history that *Underworld* is concerned with. It’s an affective history, affect on a large scale, a personal and national geo-political history that trades in nostalgia. It’s an individual-level/population-population level multi-pronged historiography and affective project that maps well onto Foucault’s two poles of biopower. The double “shot heard around the world” – the home run and the atomic bomb – sets this up perfectly.

On a population level nothing unleashes the death-fear as much as disaster. Writer and activist Naomi Klein has written at length about the neoliberal policies enacted in the wake of disaster, when the population is at its most raw, shocked, and docile. Disaster is the ever-present threat of both human technology and the state of nature. It is totalitarian – massifying (sic) – and perhaps comforting in its ability to produce a collective experience. The Soviet Atomic threat would transform the American consciousness and the cultural narrative. The Cold War narrative was biopolitical threat writ large, an
Apocalypse plot charged by an affective anxiety. It is an anxiety that can be situated within the larger history of millennialism and apocalypticism (Garner 174). According to Garner, a particular hue of anxiety, an ‘end time kitch’ – Paul Boyer’s words – that extends back through “Christian apocalypticism into Jewish messianism” and intensifies at epochal markers, emerges too, at times of crises: plague, war, national upheaval (174). The last American fin-de-siècle saw all of the above. A ratcheting up of the national and global blood pressure and the high stakes of the Cold War that established the register of a rhetoric and the anxious shadow that it cast as it crumbled in the 1980’s and 1990’s are inexorably linked to the affective-register of the time. The Cold War provided a mythic meta-narrative that – with its doomsday stakes – articulated a framework around which we organized ourselves. We entered the MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) zone, anxious equilibrium that governed the biopolitical affect of the culture.

Foucault best illuminates the underlying dynamics and the new Cold War reality of Atomic Power in his exploration of “power of life and death” (The History of Sexuality, 136). Tracing the development of mechanisms of power in the West from the classical age, the power of life and death was “in reality the right to take life or let live.” Historically, power, according to Foucault, was subtractive, “essentially a right of seizure of things, time, bodies and ultimately life itself” (136). This shifted as power began also to work to “organize the forces under it, to incite and control and mobilize forces: wars which had been waged in the name of a sovereign ruler were now waged on “behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter,” he goes on, “[t]he atomic situation is now the end point of this process: the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee
an individual’s continued existence” (137). It is the cultural logic of biopower that drives and underwrites the Cold War. At stake is “the biological existence of a population” (137). The Cold War functioned through a biopolitics centered around disciplining and optimizing the body and its capabilities at both the individual and the population level; Foucault diagnoses a complex administrative choreography of evoking alternate docility and optimization through a web of economic and political control. He envisions the individual and the population existing at two poles of biopower, a disciplinary anatomo-politics of the human body and a regulatory control of the population: “[t]he disciplines of the body and the regulations of population constituted the two poles around which the organization over life was deployed” (139). It is through this lens that we can best understand the organizing structure of the Cold War. Foucault goes on to explain biopower and its link to the specialized knowledge that brought with it the secret of the bomb. It is this hermeneutics of the bomb that DeLillo meditates upon; “we would have to speak of bio-power to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life” (Foucault, History of Sexuality, 143). Knowledge (i.e., the atomic knowledge) could now bring man’s very existence into question. This gives us insight into the mystical quality that DeLillo’s characters attribute to “the bomb.” The atomic scientist, according to Foucault, had esoteric, coveted, and apocalyptic knowledge at his disposal. The secrets of the bomb could not be understood by the masses nor by the ruling elite; this exacerbated its mystical threat and the anxious din of the affective register in which it would play out.

Adding to a reading of anxious affect, we can also usefully harness Ann
Cvetkovich’s work to reinscribe trauma; a “name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma,” she says, “forges connections between politics and emotion.” She asks us to explore “ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it” (3). Trauma lingers in personal lives, in the wake of geopolitical disaster, and in the anticipation of it. Cvektovich would have us collapse our distinctions between public and private affective responses, and she urges us to theorize trauma as a foundation for understanding Mark Seltzer’s “pathological public sphere,” one that is performed and experienced at both a deeply private and deeply public affective register. In The Queen of America Goes to Washington City, Lauren Berlant attends to the ways in which rhetorics of “a traumatized core national identity have come to describe, and thereby to make, something real” (3).

In Underworld, it is the baseball game that is the inaugural site of American postwar life and Cold War trauma. The game sets the scope of the novel. The first section of the book will unfold in the present day (Summer, 1992) and loop back to 1952. It is a panoramic view of postwar America. Its hermeneutics stem from the atomic anxiety introduced when it is revealed that the Soviets have a bomb too.

There is a secret of the bomb and there are secrets that the bomb inspires … the genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets…. And what is the connection between Us and Them, how many bundled links do we find in the neural labyrinth? It’s not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion. (DeLillo, 51)

Underworld’s Archive of Feelings

Underworld’s characters walk around anxious and traumatized, haunted by an apocalyptic specter that has seemingly gone missing yet is still very much felt. The Cold
War articulated and crystallized a legible “pathological public sphere.” In Part 2 of *Underworld*, which tracks the exhaustion of the late 1980’s as the Cold War comes to a close into the 1990’s, we see a double anticipation that captures well the complex layers of loss, nostalgia, trauma, fear, and anxiety that are the texture of public and private life in the novel. Marvin Lundy has been collecting sports memorabilia for half a century – it is embedded with a “deep eros of memory” – specifically attributed to baseball in the logic of the novel. His archive of sports memorabilia serves in the novel as a corporeal illustration of Cvetkovich’s “Archive of Feelings.” Lundy has been seeking to trace the baseball that went missing at the legendary game that inaugurates both the book and the Cold War itself, with the detonation of the Soviet bomb. The ball is a symbol of the Cold War’s affective stakes. Searching for the ball, Lundy wanders through America’s Archive of Feelings, underwritten with a sense of “being lost in America, wandering through cities with no downtowns.” As the sense of placing and meaning drained from public feeling, he said to himself a “thousand times. Why do I do this thing? What does it mean? Who has it?” (175). The baseball is Derrida’s specter – the Cold War specter haunting America as Derrida evokes Marx’s specter haunting Europe. The Cold War specter is apocalyptic – the bomb, the threat of annihilation – twined forever in *Underworld’s* theology to a game that symbolizes America’s Archive of Feeling. The ball weaves through the narrative of the book – it has a telos of its own: “And the ball has a history … that I’ve been inching along, where different things match and join. But I can’t locate…. I’m using rumors and dreams. There’s an ESP of baseball, and underground, what, a consciousness, and I’m hearing it in my sleep” (179). The ball is a coupling of the literal specter of death and its everyday personal effects, articulating Cvetkovich’s assertion that
“the specter of literal death serves as a pointed reminder of the social death of losing one’s history” (270). The baseball here is that personal history and Lundy’s search is reparative.

Lundy’s work holds much in common with Cvektovich’s description of the “queer process of documenting forms of trauma.” Describing queer archives – both literal archival collections and films – she reminds us of the “arbitrariness and ephemerality of these connections between feelings and objects, and especially between traumatic memories and objects” (254). By engaging with the archive we can “create fantasy,” facilitate “memory and mourning by aiming for affective power rather than factual truth,” as DeLillo, and Lundy, ultimately are. His search for the ball has him digging through literal archives, “I looked at a million photographs because of the dot theory of reality, that all knowledge is available if you analyze the dots.” His work to connect the dots here is the same work that filmmakers Cvekovitch profiles in her book are engaged in. Lundy is piecing together an identity – and a story – looking for what is hidden – “trying to pay attention to the specific conditions of history, culture and location that permeate the way we live and die” (255). In trying to piece together the story of the ball, it’s a story with a center that does not quite hold – a historical and personal identity that it is scattered because it is ultimately an affective and an ephemeral one. The Cold War provided a false – but comfortable – illustration of a clear organized narrative and its collapse, symbolized through a lost ball, results in mourning and anxiety.

Speaking of the Cold War itself, Lundy says, “Nothing is harmless…. You’re worried and scared. You see the Cold War winding down. This makes it hard for you to breathe.” And he articulates the critical structural technology of the Cold War: “You need
the leaders of both sides to keep the Cold War going. It’s the one constant thing. It’s honest, it’s dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that’s when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream” (170). Personal and collective affect are enmeshed, indeed somatic. It is a powerful illustration of the collapsing of the political and the personal that Berlant terms “public intimacy.”

The baseball symbolizes, too, the equilibrium that Cold War tension seemed to hold together but that came undone. This and the multilayered affective, ephemeral history to which it is connected are articulated when Nick holds the ball:

I had the baseball in my hand…. You have to know the feel of baseball in your hand, going back a while, connecting to many things, before you can understand why a man would sit in a chair at four in the morning holding such an object, clutching it – how it fits in the palm so reassuringly, the corked center making it buoyant in the hand…. You squeeze a baseball…. There’s an equilibrium, an agreeable animal tension between the hard leather object and the sort of clawed hand, veins stretching with effort…. The ball was a deep sepia, veneered with dirt and turf and generational sweat … smudged green near the Spalding trademark, it was still wearing a small green bruise where it had struck the pillar according to the history that came with it. (131)

*Underworld* is read as a systems novel; it is obsessed with systems, with connecting dots and lives in the paranoid haze of dots that cannot be connected and meaning that cannot be coherently made. Each character within the book, living in the shadow of the collapse of the Cold War’s UrSystem, also works within individual systems, highlighting the inseparability between the private and the public, the personal and the political, the everyday and the historical. Each of the characters can be understood as performing a role within the narrative of The System: Nick, the book’s protagonist, is its poet. J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, so instrumental in Cold War politics – and one could
argue the individual to whom the paranoiac obsessions of postwar America can be most attributed – is its Wizard of Oz. Nick’s brother, Matt – a chess prodigy as a child and a weapons analyst as an adult – is its scholar and its analyst. Klara, the famous New York artist with whom Nick had an affair as a teenager and whose life work culminates in the 1990’s – our period of intra-anxiety and during the novel’s present – and who is painting a fleet of “military plans that carried nuclear bombs during the Cold War” (Bloom, 129-30), is its artist. And Lenny Bruce, the other character in the book borrowed from history, appears briefly in the novel as a “true charismatic,” appearing periodically at nightclubs – first during the Cuban missile crisis shouting, “we’re all going to die!” (Wolcott, 113).

Beyond their respective roles, the characters of Underworld are all deeply engaged with thinking about systems. Nick – a waste management consultant – pursues a meditation on waste that becomes a kind of poetics of postmodern culture, an entire theological system through which the shell-shocked, corporate, postmodern world can be mined, and understood. Perhaps it is through waste that we can make peace with the postmodern condition, the neoliberal, traumatized world. “My firm was involved in waste,” Nick explains, “We were waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste.” I watched “men in moon suits bury drums of dangerous waste in subterranean salt beds many millions of years old.” Waste here is dangerous, it is layered into the bedrock of the earth, it is to be respected, feared: “Waste is a religious thing. We entomb contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread. It is necessary to respect what we discard.” Waste Management is a religious practice – with rituals and disciplines of its own. And waste is to be analyzed: “the Jesuits taught me to examine things for second meanings and deeper connections. Were they thinking about waste? We were
waste managers, waste giants, we processed universal waste. Waste has a solemn aura now” (88). Waste has an affect of its own and one that encapsulates the detritus of late capitalism. It is dangerous, it needs to be Handled With Care, buried while clad in HAZMAT suits. Waste is the omnipresent effect and the currency of late capitalism: “From the first day I find that everything I see is garbage,” Nick’s co-worker Big Sims, tells him, “I’m doing real work, important work. Landfills are important” (283).

Waste is to be understood: it is “the best-kept secret in the world” (281), and it has a hermeneutics of its own. Jesse Detwiler, “a garbage archeologist,” explains: It is to be celebrated. “Bring garbage into the open. Let people see it and respect it. Don’t hide your waste facilities. Make an architecture of waste. Design gorgeous buildings to recycle waste and invite people to collect their own garbage and bring it with them…. Get to know your garbage. And the hot stuff, the chemical waste, the nuclear waste, this becomes the landscape of nostalgia” (286). Nuclear waste here is the embodied corps of the Cold War: “Don’t underestimate our capacity for complex longings,” Detwiler goes on, “Nostalgia for the banned materials of civilization, for the brute force of old industries and old conflicts” (286). Further linking waste to the inner logic of the novel and to the Cold War, we are told that Detwiler had been arrested for snatching the garbage of J. Edgar Hoover; waste acts here as a direct link to the governing body of Cold War Anxiety. Waste illustrates the collapsing of temporal boundaries, the material persistence of Cold War anxiety and our deep affective attachment to it. Through garbage we are reminded that time is not quite linear – civilizations collapse and cities rise “on garbage, inch by inch, gaining elevation through the decades as buried debris increased” (286). Garbage is layered, like memory, and like memory, it pushes back into “every
space available, dictating construction patterns and altering systems of ritual … it produced rats and paranoia.”

Waste can be understood here as the unconscious affect of an era now collapsed but still present, still dictating the terms of our present and through which we are constantly responding. It mounts and spreads and, according to Detwiler at least, it is in fact waste that drove civilization in the first place; it forced us to “develop the logic and the rigor that would lead to systematic investigations of reality, to science, to art, music, mathematics” (287). Throughout the novel we seek Nick seeking to order his own life through small waste management, sorting out his family’s recycling, a small and repetitive ritual utterance even as he seeks to manage history on a large scale as well, to fully reign in and comprehend “history on a large scale,” to “manage” the fallout of toxic waste, to bury the embodied evidence of nuclear threat.

Nick’s brother, Matt, also trades in the material management of the nuclear apocalypse. We see him in the summer of 1974, in the hills of Southern New Mexico, at a military operation called “the Pocket” where he does weapons work of the “soft core type” (402). He thinks; he doesn’t know quite what will become of his research. Unlike Foucault’s Atomic Scientist, Matt does not quite yield the true knowledge/power; he too is a worker in a Fordist System of managing atomic power. If Nick is concerned with the poetics of the ghosts of nuclear threat, Matt is engaged with its hermeneutics; “figuring out the lurid mathematics of a nuclear accident,” he works with “data from real events. There was the thing that fell to earth on Albuquerque in 1956, a thermonuclear bomb of jumbo tonnage mistakenly released from a B-36” (402). The pocket is closed and self-referential, it has a language that is “inaccessible to others.” The people in the pocket deal
in systems; though they don’t know where their work will end up, the mathematics they trade in is a “splendid mystery, in a way, a source of wonder, how a brief equation that you tentatively enter on your screen might alter the course of many lives.” For Matt this work is affectively grounded in the desert: “He thought of Sister Edgar in sixth grade talking about desert saints,” leaving “everything behind to pursue an idea … he liked to think of a godstruck band of wanderers haunting the test ranges and silos of the West. It was part of the reason he’d come here in the first place. For the self-knowledge he might find in a sterner life, in fixing of willful limits” (413). Like all of the characters in *Underworld*, Matt is seeking some brand of asceticism, indeed a desert asceticism, a disciplined affect that is undergirded by the Cold War and by apocalyptic threat.

Klara Sax, Nick’s former lover and the wife of his high school English teacher, is also dealing with the material detritus of the Cold War’s promises of nuclear disaster, dealing with B-52’s, rather than Matt’s B-36 bombers, but also rooted in a desert asceticism. “I am now dealing with B-52 long-range bombers. I am painting the airplanes that are a hundred and sixty feet long … planes that used to carry nuclear bombs…. This is a landscape painting in which we use the landscape itself. The desert is central to this piece…. It’s so old and strong…” The desert incites “[a]we and terror…. So we use it as a place to test our weapons…. And it enables us to show our mastery. The desert bears visible signs of the detonations we set off” (71). This sparse, haunted landscape with its scars and secrets is, in *Underworld*, but one spatial access wherein the trauma of the Cold War is inscribed and memorialized.

*Affective Geographies*
Indeed, there are multiple spatial axes in *Underworld* and unpacking them all is outside the scope of this project. We can however view the book along temporal and spatial grids, each sites of personal and cultural trauma and threat that are collapsed through affect, mourned through nostalgia and disciplined through ritual and an attempt to overlay an idiosyncratic hermeneutics – be it art (Klara), waste management (Nick), the mathematics of weapons (Matt), or the archives of a baseball (Lundy). The book’s present is located in the desert but its past exists on the rooftops and the alleyways and subway tunnels of New York City. The spatial grid begins in the Public Sphere – a baseball stadium, a game sparsely attended because technology – television, radio – has enabled a new kind of privatized domestic space.

Postmodern Critical Geographer, Edward Soja, insists that we push ourselves toward a “spatialization of critical thought”: “[w]e must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life” (Soja, 6). According to Soja, Foucault recognized the ontological and epistemological significance of spatiality. Quoting Foucault on space as opposed to time: “Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic.” Critical Geography demands that we “make space visible again” (Soja, 119). We must interrogate space with all of the critical tools we employ exploring temporality. Critical Geography troubles temporality; it seeks to re-colonize the theorization of space, to infuse it with the same rich, dynamic, dialectic nuance that we privilege temporality with. Troubling the temporal assumptions of narrative, we can harness this “reassertion of
a spatial emphasis in ontological, epistemological, and theoretical discourse” (44) to productively interrogate and to explore the “affective geographies” of trauma.

Spatialization allows us to “enter the narration at almost any point.” Soja cites Jorge Louis Borges’ story, *The Aleph* to illustrate this. The Aleph is, for Soja, “the only place on earth where all places are a limitless space of simultaneity and paradox” (2). Borges describes a “single gigantic instant,” in which he “saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency” (qtd. Soja, 2). Borges’ Aleph is a useful metaphor for understanding the collapse of space and of time at work in the affective experience. It also sounds very much like cyberspace.

*Underworld* begins in prologue and ends in epilogue, narrative conventions that, indeed, play with the overlapping of time; an old nun, who taught Nick when he was growing up in the Bronx, dies. Her name too, is, Edgar, a corollary to J. Edgar. As she dies, she evaporates into hyperspace. Cyberspace, the newest Insurrection, serves as a proper collapsing point for the liminal anxiety of the fin-de-siècle—indeed “it” is a liminal non-space, postmodernity actualized; there is no there. “There is no space or time out here … only connection … everything gathered and linked, hyperlinked … but she is in cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems … she senses the paranoia of the web…. There’s the perennial threat of virus, of course” (DeLillo, 825).

The Cold War birthed the systems novel; the web is an actualization of the paranoid connection and looming threat it chronicled. Sister Edgar disappears into the Atomic blast that announced itself in the book’s prologue and that J. Edgar – perhaps the greatest devotee of the Cold War’s theology – bore witness to:
When you decide on a whim to visit the H-bomb home page, she begins to understand. Everything in your computer, the plastic, silicon and Mylar, every logical operation and processing function, the memory, the hardware, the software, the ones and zeros … it all culminates here…. Every thermonuclear bomb ever tested, all the data gathered from each shot, code name, test site…. She sees the flash, the thermal pulse…. She sees the shock wave and hears the high winds and feels the power of false faith, the faith of paranoia, and then the mushroom cloud spreads around her … (DeLillo, 825)

And of course, in the Underworld present, when the false faith of paranoia has been exposed, its specter lingers, and indeed, with the attacks of September 11th, a mushroom cloud would erupt.

It is fitting that the book ends with a final evaporation into the Postmodern Turn – or Jameson’s postmodern break – when, finally, everything is a simulacrum, where reality itself is determined only by systems and signs, numbers and space itself are dematerialized into “pure ideation and representation” (Soja, 7). Hyperspace troubles the ontology, the spatiality, the materiality, and the temporality of life – it is, in some ways, a fully Postmodern space, in particular in its anticipation. In 1997, when Underworld was written, hyperspace was in its infancy and so it was largely a specter too, one that threatened to de-tether us from materiality altogether, to annihilate us but leave us living.

The Postmodern Systems novels such as Underworld have long been understood as drenched in paranoia, intricate systems (often exemplified through the infernal machine) of conspiracy and threat that undergird the Postmodern Condition. Indeed, if society and its novels are trading in bodies of living data – well, there must be puzzles to be solved, loops to be closed, dots to be connected, and it is in these gaps of anxious liminality that, before the loop is quite closed, though it promises to be soon – Systems Novels and
paranoia linger. DeLillo is, indeed, a master of this but by seemingly fully embracing the logics of paranoia he transcends it. The bag of paranoid tricks is a paper tiger and behind it lies a deeper need. Layers of affective, nostalgic longing, the “grid” absorbs emotion and trauma and need; “the corporation is supposed to take us outside ourselves …” but things still “tend to drift dimly inward,” and all human lapses “take up space in the company soul.” a world that “persists .. .heals in a way … you feel contact points around you, the caress of linked grids” (89).

Paranoia, is, however, a reductive reading and as Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick so helpfully instructs, Paranoid Reading, of texts and of cultural affect, acts as a foreclosure of possibility: “it is in fact a way of “disavowing affect in order to claim ownership over truth” (Love, 245). It is however, through affect and with Sedgwick’s helpful insight about reparative reading, that I hope to place Underworld and the Intra-Anxiety Period of the 1990’s. As Tavia Nyong’o explains in his essay “Trapped in the Closet with Eve” (2010), “As a critical strategy, paranoia falls under the kind of totalizing, ‘strong theory’ of the world that explains too much, explains too well, and ultimately explains away the more worthwhile local readings.” DeLillo connects affect, paranoia, hauntings and the materiality – thus opening a window for Sedgwick’s reparative reading of the local on the first page of Underworld:

Longing on a large scale is what makes history. This is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge above the river, and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations, the unseen something that haunts the day … (11)
Collective affect, “longing,” the “vast shaking of the soul,” “desperations” are composed of a standard-issue “local yearning”; so, too, cities – the ultimate illustration of the collective system – are created by the heat of individual bodies.

Nyong’o’s assessment is that Sedgwick’s writings and critical strategies seek “to diminish the strength of paranoid epistemologies, opening out the world for a wider range of response than a hermeneutics of suspicion allows” (245). We can use Sedgwick’s reparative reading, in part, as pivot point, in which to turn to the question of fiction itself and the ways in which it sought to intervene in the period of Intra-Anxiety and the ways in which it read itself and often worried over its own positionality.
Part II

The Conspicuously Young: Fictional Life at the End of the Cold War and in the Period of Intra-Anxiety

The generation that cut their teeth on DeLillo and similar writers of The Systems Novel grew up on an American diet of TV, nihilism, postmodern theory, the final exhausted yawn of the Cold War and its last moments of apocalyptic dread. These writers, who began their careers in the 1980’s and 1990’s, spent quite a bit of time and ink worrying over the state of the novel and the state of America and the state of the American reader and “What Fiction Does.” They published articles with names like “Why Bother?” “… Television and U.S. Fiction,” “Fiction Futures of the Conspicuously Young.” They vented their worries in ‘conspicuously young’ forums with titles like “The Future of Fiction” in The Review of Contemporary Fiction. They would eventually conclude that fiction is ultimately “a solution, the best solution, to the problem of existential solitude” (Franzen, Further Away, 42) but on the road to articulating such a universal and temporally indifferent sentiment there were years of unpacking what it meant to be a young writer in the 1980’s and 1990’s (a totally exhausted time, according to Christian Slater in the iconic 1990 teen film, Pump up the Volume).

In this section I will explore this worried writerly discourse of the 1980’s and 1990’s. With Underworld we saw the periodization of an era. The discourse addressed
here will provide another, more immediate, view of the era and question – or at least problematize – the ability of the novel to engage with it at all, as, of course, *Underworld* does. Primarily I’m concerned with the essays of David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen,

Indeed, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s essay (2003) “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or You’re so Paranoid, you Probably Think This Essay is About You,” noted in the previous section, serves as a helpful pivot point for thinking about the affective climate of fiction in the 1980’s and the 1990’s and the affective climate of the intra-anxiety period we are concerned with more broadly. She begins the essay thinking about the AIDS epidemic; the AIDS epidemic stood as a new kind of national apocalyptic plague around which cultural paranoia could be organized in the 1980’s and 1990’s, as the exhausted Cold War rattled its final death throws. Attending to the specificity of the AIDS epidemic itself, with its material life-and-death urgency and its extreme illustration of “the power to let die,” would be beyond the scope of this project. However, the time cannot be understood without this backdrop and the particular hue of anxious affect cannot be attended to without apprehending this central, looming specter. The collapsing boundary between the Cold War and the AIDS epidemic and the twin ways in which they both symbolize a looming apocalypse – Stanton B. Garner’s “apocalyptic millennialism” noted above – is nowhere better illustrated than in Tony Kushner’s 1993 *Angels in America*. Ghosts of the Cold War haunt the play in the form of arch-Cold War Warrior-McCarthyite Attorney Roy Cohn himself and in the form of Ethel Rosenberg who haunts Cohn in the depths of his late-stage AID dementia. Biopower is, according to Brian Masumi, concerned with the ever-presence of indiscriminate threat, riddled with
anywhere-anytime potential (Mausumi, 157); it is a threat that permeates the Cold War, the AIDS epidemic, and *Angels in America*. An underlying imbalance, a systemic weirdness, inhabits the moment, as Harper – a depressive, pill-popping, Mormon housewife – explains: “I’m not safe here, things aren’t right with me . . . weird stuff happens” (p.23). In the words of Prior Walter, another one of the play’s hallucinatory protagonists: “Everything’s . . . closing in. Weirdness on the periphery” (168). This weirdness is experienced as AIDS dementia, as hallucinations whose terms are defined in the eco-political threat of the ozone layer, the larger cultural unmooring to apocalyptic postmodernism and the urgency of the looming plague. Perhaps, as Deborah R. Geis suggests, AIDS dementia is a “vision of a universal plague.” The first decade of the AIDS epidemic was a time, Sedgwick reminds us, when speculation “was ubiquitous about whether the virus had been deliberately engineered or spread, whether HIV represented a plot or experiment by the U.S. military that had gotten out of control . . .” (124), a general “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

This paranoid affect infused our culture, politics, and literature, in both the way we read and the way that our writers wrote. Paranoia was less a “diagnosis then a prescription” (125). Paranoia tends to be contagious, Sedgwick tells us, its internal logic leading to the injunction that “you can never be paranoid enough.” For Sedgwick Paranoia “represents not only a strong affect theory but a strong negative affect theory,” and she recommends an intervention of reparative reading: “it is not only important but possible to find ways of attending to . . . reparative motives and positionalities. The vocabulary for articulating any reader’s reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary,” yet it is
“no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions and risks” and in taking such risks perhaps we can extract “sustenance from the objects of culture.” It is out of this paranoid, anxious, apocalyptic milieu that a new generation of writers and readers emerged: writers who are products of the paranoid reading of literature and culture but who wondered if fiction itself could offer a reparative interrogation of the culture itself.

“Conspicuously young” (C.Y. in Wallace’s abbreviation), up-and-coming writers of the day, both Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace would mature into significant literary voices, and they both cite DeLillo as a considerable influence. Central to Wallace’s conception of fiction and the fiction writer is the role of television in the lives of C.Y. writers of the 1980’s and 90’s. “Fiction writers as species tend to be oglers,” he says in the 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” “[T]elevision does a lot of our predatory human research for us,” but of course “what young writers are scanning for data on some reality to fictionalize is already composed of fictional characters in highly formalized narratives … [t]elevision does not afford true espial because television is performance” (22-24). Television is significant for fiction writers because “American literary fiction tends to be about U. S. culture and the people who inhabit it,” and C.Y. writers (in 1988), those, born after “say, 1955” were the first generation “for whom television [was] something to be lived with not just looked at.” (Wallace, Both Flesh and Not, 43). They experienced this phenomenon in a wholly new way; “much of our original play was a simple reenactment” says Wallace, evoking Baudrillard’s postmodern simulacra.
One consequence is that television viewers are encouraged to identify with characters who don’t face mortality, and that, posits Wallace, has real costs. We might “lose any sense of eschatology, thus of teleology, and live in a moment that is, paradoxically, both emptied of intrinsic meaning or end and quite literally eternal.” This is the temporal liminality of the 1990’s. Wallace argues that “the nexus where television and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony” (“A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” 45). Television, Wallace believes, has its “pretty weird hand” on his generation’s throats; it produced a generation of writers who trade in straight-faced irony, and while “irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective,” they are also “agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and for aspiring fiction writers they pose especially terrible problems” (49). Television, he posits, is “able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism that television requires of Audience in order to be commercially and psychologically viable” (50). Wallace goes on to name the postmodern, metafiction/image-fiction of the era, the fiction of the image, saturated with pop-culture and consumer reference, which not only uses or mentions televisual culture, but is a response to it (51). “Image Fiction is paradoxically trying to restore what’s taken for “real” to three whole dimensions, to reconstruct a univocally round world out of disparate streams of flat sights.” Yet it often devolves into mirroring of the vacuous culture it seeks to critique. “Whether or not 1990’s youth culture seems as grim to you as it does to me, surely we can agree that the culture’s TV-defined pop ethic has pulled a marvelous touché on the postmodern aesthetic that originally sought to co-opt and redeem the pop” (64). Television, for
Wallace, is the currency of the postmodern ironic nihilism of 1990’s culture; he cites DeLillo’s *White Noise*: “We can’t get outside the aura. We’re part of the aura” (qtd, 69).

In his 1984 novel, *White Noise*, DeLillo evokes and interrogates the affective ecosystem woven into the texture of late capitalism in America, where affect is deployed for biopolitical ends. *White Noise* presents an economy, a whole ecosystem of affective dread and comic-fear, an ambient/electric current pulsing though postmodern society. In a culture "bereft of strong ties to religion, community, or family," Jack Gladney and his wife become obsessed with their own mortality. They seek relief in TV, in the cold surreal familiar light of product-saturated supermarkets and in the form of a – top secret, highly experimental – drug called Dylar that promises to relieve the fear of death. There are two types of White Noise in DeLillo’s work, according to critic Cornell Bonca, "one issuing from capitalism and commodities, the other man’s deepest expression of his death fear.” Television itself looms large in the novel. Television is a liminal space, and like the supermarkets and malls that populate the Wallace’s metafiction cannon, it’s a space wherein the orienting logics of temporality are suspended. These are aestheticized spaces of consumption, a postmodern, mass-culture articulation of that which is timeless and where “political consciousness – whether a recognition the ecological damages created by mass consumption or an acknowledgment of one’s individual death – vanished in formalism, the contemplation of pleasing structural features” (Duvall, 434).

Television privatizes, it sends us inside, away from the public sphere, so the world is experienced alone, inside, yet it creates a new kind of public, a new kind of population-level subject united through “waves and radiation” at scale and with an efficiency unknown before. It penetrates the affective membrane. Pop culture scholar Ron Suskind,
a friend of the novel’s “Hitler Studies” scholar Jack Gladney, says, “I’ve come to understand that the medium is a primal force in the American home. Sealed-off, timeless, self-contained, self-referring,” like any closed-system.

It is like a myth being born right there in our living room, something we know in a dreamlike and preconscious way.... You have to learn how to look. You have to open yourself to the data. TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data.... Look at the wealth of data concealed in the grid, in the bright packaging, the jingles, the slice-of-life commercials, the products hurtling out of darkness, the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. ‘Coke is it, Coke is it, Coke is it.’ The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond. .. (DeLillo, 1984, 51)

Suskind’s students disagree with him: “Worse than junk mail. Television is the death throes of human consciousness, according to them.” In Suskind’s analysis we see that, in television, consumerism is targeted at the affective “dreamlike, preconscious” register, the “coded messages, commercials” delivering “psychic data.” It is data with the agenda to produce docile consumer bodies. The temporal suspension of the virtual world is precisely that of the temporality of affect. According to Patricia Clough, “the temporality of affect is to be understood in terms of thresholds ... the temporality of the virtual” (Clough, 2010, 209). In her book Auto Affection: Unconscious thought in the age of teletechnology, Clough writes about the affective pull of television, in a piece titled “Television: A Sacred Machine” too long to quote at any length, in which the television is:

an apparatus of display: the machine/It holds me on display/It is made of tracking devices/that attack me without pity/like projectiles/tracking me in parts of the display./I am afraid when you see what comforts me./It is a holding apparatus: the machine./It holds me up/cradles me./It is made of framing devices that negate/reverse, and enlarge/-to perfect and protect./It make me an ideal surface of projection and protection. (Clough, 2000, p.21)
Indeed, television functions here as a Foucaultian apparatus, made with biopolitical “tracking devices” (a tracking device is inherently an instrument of biopower) targeted at the affective register, comforting, anesthetizing, transmitting psychic data in the form of “projectiles” creating docile bodies and “framing” their perception.

For Wallace television institutionalizes irony, narcissism, nihilism, stasis, loneliness (73). To this end, television is a crucial node through which neoliberalism creates docile bodies, in Foucauldian terms, or, in Marxist terms, alienation.

Wallace divides the contemporary fiction written by C.Y writers of the time into “three dreary camps”: Neiman-Marcus Nihilism, Catatonic Realism, and Workshop Hermeticism.

“Neiman-Marcus Nihilism,” typified perhaps by Bret Easton Ellis’ uber materialist monster, Patrick Bateman (American Psycho, 1991), features “six-figure yuppies and their salon-tanned, morally vacant offspring.” “Catatonic Realism, a.k.a. Ultraminimalism, a.k.a Bad Carver, in which suburbs are wastelands, adults automata, and narrators blank perceptual engines, intoning in run-on monosyllables the artificial ingredients of breakfast cereal and the new human non-soul.” Here, too, we might recognize Bateman’s endless, affectless listing of products, CDs, the elite materialist fuselage of the morally bankrupt rich. Blank Fiction, however, became a tradition of its own, “flat, affectless, atonal prose and non-committed narrative voices.” Dennis Cooper – known for this five novel George Miles Cycle – is one of its most successful practitioners. It is alternately labeled: Post-Punk, New Narrative, and Blank Fiction. All is writing that attends to the complexities of postmodern living drawing on traditions of decadence, the grotesque, and a kinship with European literatures, the European avant-
garde and its larger philosophical project. Wallace may not be particularly sympathetic to
the nuance of this mode and does not attend to Cooper per se. Cooper is probing the
edgier side of 1980’s “Neiman-Marcus Realism,” a side that emerges from the small
press post-punk publishing scene of the 1970’s and 1980’s (Kennedy, 1). His work
“rehearses the difficulties of postmodern living” and luxuriates in the scummy glamour of
Downtown New York at the time, the socio-cultural politics, aesthetics and affect of the
decaying yet generative city-scape. It stands as a foil to Ellis, whose flat, affect-less prose
is similar – responding to the materialist decadence of the time, Cooper’s probes the post-
punk underside. Still the two speak in very much the same, quiet, affect-free,
monochromatic register that Wallace is highlighting here.

Wallace goes on to enumerate a third category. “Workshop Hermeticism …
‘competent’ ‘finished’ ‘problem-free’ … no character without Freudian trauma and in an
inaccessible past, without near-diagnostic physical description, no image unsolved into
regulation Updikean metaphor” (Wallace, 41). Writers have recently turned their gaze to
this brand of Workshop fiction. In The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of
Creative Writing (2009), Mark McGurl explores American Fiction in the postwar period
through the prism of Creative Writing programs, specifically the Iowa Writers Workshop.
McGurl contends that “the rise of the creative writing program stands as the most
important event in postwar American literary history” (ix). More recently, the publishing
arm of the literary journal n+1 issued “MFA vs. NYC: The Two Cultures of American
Fiction” (2014) wherein current “conspicuously young” writers navel-gazed over the

2 The institutionalization of the Creative Writing Program itself may have deep ties to its
own Cold War specters. Eric Bennet contends in his article, “How Iowa Flattened
Literature” (2014), that in 1967 the Iowa Writers’ Workshop received a donation from
the Fairfield Foundation, a CIA front.
impact and afterlives of the saturation of MFA programs. Wallace, writing twenty years earlier, distrusted the ‘Academic Writing Program.’ “Little things like interestingness, depth of vision, originality, political assumptions and agendas, the question of whether deviation from norm is in some cases OK – must, for sound Program-pedagogical reasons, be ignored are discouraged. Too, in order to remain both helpful and sane, the professional writer/teacher has got to develop, consciously or not, an aesthetic doctrine, a static set of principles about how a ‘good’ story works” (59). Part of the problem, for Wallace, is that these programs produce students who soak up a self-referential canon of Writers Who are Important to You – i.e., “Salinger invented the wheel” – and are largely ignorant of the history of ‘Great (western) Literature;’ Wallace argues that these writers exist in a “social Now that admits neither a passion for the future nor curiosity about the past.” 1987, he says, is not a nice place to be. His generation was born out of the paranoid ashes of Watergate, reared on television, sunny, vacuous and cynical Reagan rhetoric, and the emergence of a high-impact neoliberalism that caused the “Gold-Card-fear-and-trembling-fiction [to just keep] coming” (67). Yet, Wallace holds out hope: “fiction in a grey time should not be grey.” Wallace ends “E Unibus Pluram” hopefully as well; perhaps the next generation of real literary rebels will “back away from ironic watching” and treat “old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S life with conviction” (81).

The Harper’s Essay(s)

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3 Worth noting, perhaps, that this was written before Wallace’s reportedly stellar tenure as a professor of creative writing (see D.T. Max’s biography of Wallace, Every Love Story is a Ghost Story (2012)).
Perhaps one of the great literary friendships of our time is that of David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen. In 1996, Franzen, then a relatively unknown young novelist wrote something of a manifesto for Harper’s Magazine. It is a recalcitrant essay, melancholy and meandering, but sharply intelligent. Titled “Why Bother,” the piece “[is] ... affecting – it ha[s] the charm and the directness typical of all his work – [and it is] above all so long, that few noticed its incoherence” (Wood, 2004). In the essay Franzen weaves together a highly polemical, extremely tangential and deeply personal piece wherein he recounts his own struggle with depression, and he frames the essay in terms of a larger “despair about the American novel” (Franzen, 1996) specifically the “social novel.”

Was his depression a sickness of the soul or a deeply felt reaction to a larger sickness of society, Franzen wonders? At this time Franzen was living at Yaddo, the writers’ colony, and reading Paula Fox’s novel Desperate Characters. The book resonated so deeply with him; that he “could find company and consolation and hope in an object pulled almost at random from a bookshelf – felt akin to an instance of religious grace” (Franzen, 1996). Reading the book brought to the forefront a multitude of questions about the nature of the novel and its role in society. How does the novel engage with culture and how does the culture engage with the novel? What role does fiction have in the cultural, intellectual, and economic market place? Does there exist a serious and pertinent discourse around contemporary fiction? The essay kindled a “discussion thread” of sorts in a series of essays that followed in the next ten years in the pages of Harper’s Magazine. Novelists Ben Marcus and Cynthia Ozick and critic James Wood address the piece specifically and engage in an ongoing dialogue about the questions raised.
This conversation—extending across temporal boundaries and enacted on the pages of a “highbrow,” “literary,” established anti-establishment magazine—illustrates well the role periodical culture continues to play in shaping and animating the Public Sphere and public conversation, as outlined by Mark Morrison in *The Public Face of Modernism*. Morrison is concerned not only in unpacking and challenging the idealization of the open and vital public sphere theorized by Habermas but also in thinking through modernism's treatment of the public discourse in light of its pessimistic view of the role of the commercial mass market and publication industries. Here the specific conversation about the role of the novel and reading in the shadow of contemporary late capitalism, with its Oprah driven big-box publishing industry, serves as an illuminating case-study in the nature of reading, writing and culture work today.

Recalling Sedgwick’s reparative reading, we can ask ourselves what the act of reading tells us about the affective life of our culture. What were the stakes of reading and writing for the generation of C.Y. writers reared on television and for the culture at large?

Jonathan Franzen wanted to write an uncompromising novel, a big social novel that explored the nature of American experience and reality. Moreover, he believed that a novelist “could trick Americans into confronting [negative aspects of American culture and of capitalism] if he could package his subversive bombs in a sufficiently seductive narrative” (Franzen, 1996). He had models for this kind of fiction; *Catch-22*, for example, had seeped into both the national imagination and the vernacular. *Webster’s Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* provides five definitions of the title’s meaning. Franzen’s first book *The Twenty-Seventh City* was, he hoped, this kind of socially engaged novel,
exploring municipal ambitions, crime, apathy, and distraction in a mid-western city. The book was well received, but Franzen felt that his “culturally engaged novel” failed to “engage with the culture.” The reviews, though largely positive, felt to Franzen as if they existed in a vacuum. “I’d … realized that the money, the hype, the limo ride to a *Vogue* shoot weren’t simply fringe benefits. They were the main prizes, the consolation for no longer mattering in culture” (Franzen, 1996).

In attempting to craft a social novel, Franzen thought that he could put characters in a “dynamic social setting” and, as he began his third novel, a novel that became the much lauded bestseller *The Corrections*, he wanted to bridge the space between private experience and public context (Franzen, 1996). He felt, though, that he was bloating the book with issues, clogging it with information; how, he wondered, could a novel “engage with a culture in crisis when the crisis consists of the impossibility of engaging with the culture?” (Franzen, 1996).

Is it possible for the novel to engage with a culture that does not seem to read novels? Do Americans read literary fiction? How, for that matter, can we define literary fiction? In probing these questions, Franzen spoke with Shirley Brice Heath, a linguistic anthropologist and a professor at Stanford. Heath was interested in who reads “substantive works of fiction” (loosely defined, for purposes of her initial research, as trade-paperbacks). Heath spent time in what she calls “enforced transition zones,” trains, airports, public spaces wherein people are captive for a period of time. She spoke to those she saw buying or reading fiction books. From her interviews, Heath concluded that there are two types of readers: those that read out of “habit,” because it was modeled for them as children by their parents or friends, and the “social isolate” reader. For the reader who
is a “social isolate,” or “resistant readers” as she terms them, the primary dialogue in their lives is with the authors of the books they read. This lends a unique urgency to the work done in the conversation of public/counter-public sphere and positions the act of reading and the written world as a privileged site of public intimacy. The social isolate takes refuge in reading at an early age because they feel different from everyone around them. This, she admits, is difficult to uncover in an interview (and somewhat vague, it seems, for who does not feel themselves “different”?). This binary model is problematic as well because it does not speak to the relationship that a person who may “read by habit” has with the material that they are reading and the actual experience of reading.

It is the “resistant reader” that often becomes a writer, Heath says. The brand of social isolation felt by readers may be different than that felt by the number crunchers of the world, those that take refuge in facts and figures. The novel is a deeply imagined and complex world unto itself, filled with nuance and psychology: it is a socially engaged space. A resistant reader (or writer) is a “socially isolated individual who wants to communicate with a substantive imaginary world,” says Heath.

In his essay, Franzen focuses on this type of isolation and locates it as fundamental to the work of reading and writing. Reading is slow work and it is, Franzen posits, antithetical to the “hyperkinesias of modern life”; novels as a product fight an uphill battle in a consumer economy that likes “things” that wear out quickly.

What exactly is the project of fiction, not just the “social novel” that Franzen concerns himself with, but the work of fiction at large? What, if anything, can fiction do that other forms of art and entertainment cannot do? Flannery O’Conner states that fiction should embody “mystery” through “manners.” “Mystery” here is the existential, the
Dionysian, the ontological, the big questions of meaning; good fiction raises more questions than it can answer, Franzen says. Mystery is the soul of fiction. Manners, on the other hand, are the nuts and bolts of human behavior. “It is always necessary,” says O’Conner (1957) “to remember that the fiction writer is much less immediately concerned with grand ideas and bristling of emotion than he is with putting list slippers on clerks” (O’Conner, 70). Franzen worries that this type of specificity cannot exist in today’s cultural milieu because of technological consumerism and the uniformity of mass-culture. O’Conner argues that the road to specificity of manners is through regionalism; Southerners writing about the South can engage with a cultural landscape that they feel a sense of ownership of. While he concedes that there is a great deal of identity politics in current culture – there is room, of course, for black lesbians to write about the “black lesbian experience” – Franzen fears that the monolith of American culture trumps the singularity of a unique cultural experience. To ignore this, Franzen says, is to “court nostalgia” (65); to engage with it “is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism is an infernal machine …” (69). Certainly some talented writers, Pynchon, DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace, for example have found a way to write “consumerism is an infernal machine” in ways that are deeply felt and engaging. For Franzen, however there is a conundrum; he wants both to write the kind of novel of ideas that O’Conner cautions against but to locate it in a kind of specificity he doubts exists. How can a novel engage the culture? What does the social novel look like? For Franzen the solution is aesthetic: take refuge in prose and in realism. Realism and coherence, along with information and
cultural touchstones, may be able to supply a brand of regionalism, a clarity of purpose that can engage an audience.

In an essay titled “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as we Know it: A Correction,” published in 2005 in Harper’s Magazine, Ben Marcus takes issue with Franzen’s ideas about “clarity” and “realism.” Marcus argues that Franzen believes that it is the job of fiction to attract and please readers. Marcus thinks that fiction has a different project altogether. He is an experimental writer; he looks to innovators such as Gertrude Stein, William Gaddis, and Samuel Beckett as his literary heroes. He thinks that fiction should be challenging and that prose should be difficult and thrilling. Prose should offer “new syntax, and lyrical complex grammar … entirely new syntactical byways” (Marcus, 2005). He argues that Franzen believes written language should function in the modest fashion that spoken language does. For Marcus the question of the social novel is the wrong one. “Maybe literature is fighting for its very life because powerful pundits have declared a halt to all artistic progress, declaring it pretentious, alienating, bad for business” (Marcus, 2005).

In yet another article that was published in Harper’s Magazine that year, novelist Cynthia Ozick considers Franzen’s essay of a decade ago. In “Literary Entrails: The boys in the alley, the disappearing readers, and the novel’s ghostly twin,” Ozick posits that Franzen is, at base, speaking of the “deafening silence of irrelevance” as the “common culture has undermined the novelist’s traditional role as news-bringer” (Ozick, 2007). Franzen’s thesis is not fresh, Ozick says, nor is it stale. What is new, Ozick contends, is “linking the question of public literacy with marketplace lust … [with] ‘making it’” (Ozick, 2007). By contrast, Ozick considers Lionel Trilling’s thoughts on the subject of
literary readership fifty years ago. Quoting Trilling, she says, “The writer must define his audience by its abilities ... [h]e does well, if he cannot see his right audience within immediate reach of his voice, to direct his words to his spiritual ancestors, or to posterity, or even, if need be, to a coterie.” This thinking is perhaps more in line with Marcus’; that is, one should write for a small, specialized population, and that the novelist need not concern himself with the culture at large. Ozick argues that the key to the problem of the contemporary novel and novelist lies not with the readers or writers. She criticizes both Marcus and Franzen for being preoccupied with the question of audience. There will always be writers and there will always be readers, she says; the real trouble is that there is no literary criticism. The novel is an independent art, she states. “The next Saul Bellow may at this very moment be playing patty-cake in his crib—or we may have to wait another two hundred years or so for a writer of equal intellect and brio and breadth to turn up. It hardly matters. The ‘fate of the novel,’ is not in question.... What is missing is a powerfully persuasive, and pervasive, intuition for how they [novels] are connected, what they portend in the aggregate, how they comprise and color an era. A novel, it goes without saying, is an idiosyncrasy: it stands alone, it intends originality—and if it is commandeered by genius it will shout originality.... What is missing is an … infrastructure of serious criticism” (Ozick, 2007).

Ozick is quick to distinguish the kind of critical infrastructure that she is calling for from both book reviews and academic theory. Reviewers, along with big bookstore chains and websites like Amazon.com, are part and parcel of the publishing industry. Websites that encourage “customer reviews” develop a cult of the amateur. These reviewers tend to gravitate to “easy prose and uplifting endings”. Conversely, academic
theorists are often confined to rigid ideologies, politics and jargon that have “marinated literature in dogma” (Ozick, 2007). A critic is a reader-by-occupation, intimately attuned to a society’s cultural temperature. A critic “must summon what the reviewer cannot: horizonless freedoms, multiple histories, multiple libraries, multiple metaphysics and intuitions. Reviewers are not merely critics to a lesser degree,” Ozick states, “Critics belong to a wholly distinct phylum.” To illustrate this, Ozick considers the New York Times Book Review’s recently published list of the best books of the last twenty-five years. A group of writers were asked to name the best novel of the past twenty-five years. The list that emerged was predictable, though arguably well-reasoned – it included works by the preeminent authors of the day: Morrison, Roth, Updike, DeLillo, and Cormac McCarthy. Ozick points out that an essay musing on the outcome made no effort to “investigate the possibly intermarried lineage of any of these works: what, for instance,” she says, “has Nick in DeLillo’s Underworld absorbed from the Nick of Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby?” She goes on to point out that the novels on the list had never been suspected of being linked, either horizontally or vertically. This, she says, is the project of criticism; it “explains both ancestrally and contemporaneously, not only how literature evolves but how literature influences and alters the workings of human imagination” (Ozick, 2007). This, it seems, is exactly what Franzen feels is missing when he complains that the reviews of his novel seemed to be published in a “vacuum.”

Franzen laments the isolated work of reading and writing. “Writers and readers have always been prone to .. .estrangement,” he says, “[b]ut the estrangement becomes more profound, urgent, and dangerous when that virtual community [of readers] is no longer densely populated and heavily trafficked” (Franzen, 1997). It is precisely the
infrastructure supplied by the criticism that Ozick calls for that can create the virtual community that Franzen longs for and elevate his sense of readerly isolation.

Ozick cites The New Republic’s James Wood as a writer who practices the kind of multifaceted and elastic criticism she is calling for. Wood’s work is predicated on a notion of indebtedness and connectivity; it is historical and sociological in scope. James Wood wrote one such critical essay titled “Jonathan Franzen and the ‘Social Novel.’” Wood begins by highlighting the obvious flaw with Franzen’s reasoning about the impossibility of a social novel: September 11th. Franzen’s essay was written in the mid-1990’s and was marinated in a time of what he perceived as cultural stasis. Wood quotes Jonathan Franzen’s “social novel” The Corrections: “It seemed to Enid that current events in general were more muted or insipid nowadays than they’d been in her youth. She had memories of the 1930s; she’d seen firsthand what could happen to a country when the world economy took its gloves off.... But disasters of this magnitude no longer seemed to befall the United States” (Franzen, 2001). This, Wood, points out “seems sadly archival” because, in truth, “whatever the novel gets up to, the ‘culture’, can always get up to something bigger” (Wood, 2005).

The essay does embody exactly the kind of infrastructure Ozick is looking for. It examines Franzen’s novel The Corrections, but, unlike a review, it places it in a larger context. The essay considers Franzen’s other work, including the essay “Why Bother?” as well as Don DeLillo, Thomas Mann, and larger cultural and aesthetic questions. Wood argues that when Franzen speaks about the novel’s engagement with culture, his real interest is how the “culture should engage with the novel.” Wood goes on to say, “Franzen’s Harper’s essay proposed, in effect, a softened DeLilloism. What is retained
from DeLillo is the tentacular ambition, the effort to pin down an entire writhing culture. The DeLilloian idea of the novelist as a kind of Frankfurt School entertainer, fighting the culture with dialectical devilry …” (Wood, 2004). Wood concludes, aptly, “It is easy to imagine that the press of modernity makes authentic encounter uniquely difficult, that we are all belated exceptionalists. But this is postmodern provincialism, surely, and Franzen in his heart, seems not to believe it either” (Wood, 2004). These insights do indeed provide a template for an infrastructure that Ozick envisions; it is an infrastructure that Franzen himself longs for. A discourse like this one speaks to a very particular hole in our culture. It is a hole that Jonathan Franzen feels acutely.

Jonathan Franzen, Ben Marcus, Cynthia Ozick, James Wood, and Flannery O’Conner (and many others) are concerned with the role of the novel. What does the novel do for us, personally and culturally? They agree that some fiction is better than other fiction. They agree that fiction needs to say something about the “mystery” that is at the soul of human experience. “Fiction does not invent in a vacuum,” says Ozick in an essay on Saul Bellow’s novel *Ravelstein*, “but it invents; and what it invents is, first, the fabric and cadence of language, and then the slant of an idea that sails out of these as a fin lifts from the sea. The art of the novel … is in the mix of idiosyncratic language – language imprinted in the writer, like the whorl of the fingertip – and an unduplicable design inscribed on the mind by character and image” (Ozick, 2006).

It is agreed, too, that there is a need for community of readership. The “social” in the “social novel” is not merely the way in which the novel confronts the culture. As Wood suggests, we need to consider the way that the culture confronts the novel. This meeting point, where culture confronts the novel, is the community of readers and critics.
It is a space for a discourse. This kind of discourse is, as Franzen asserts, particularly problematic in the solitary landscape of reading and writing, but it is critical. After the publication of Jonathan Franzen’s *Harper’s* essay, there was renewed interest in the work of Paula Fox, whose novel *Desperate Characters* he quotes at length. The book, which had fallen out of print, was re-issued along with several other titles by Fox. This is a salient example of the need for an “infrastructure,” a matrix where the novel meets the culture. Franzen was deeply depressed; he read a book and it made him feel a little less alone; he wrote about the book and explored the nature of his isolation and depression. His writing was perceived as significant, others took him to task, contemplated what he had to say, and began a public dialogue. As a byproduct, *Desperate Characters* was brought back into print so that new generation’s “little Saul Bellows playing patty-cake” could read it. The culture engaged with the novel; ultimately Franzen’s essay was inspired by reading a novel; the culture had engaged with the novel and the novel with the culture. In the essay “Further Away,” Franzen eulogies (in a manner) David Foster Wallace: “he’d been very explicit in our many discussions of the purpose of novels, about his belief that fiction is a solution, the best solution, to the problem of existential isolation” (44). Fiction is a solution not only to the way out of personal isolation but in the political economic terms of Foucault and Marx it is, perhaps, a (momentary) way out of docility, alienation, or, for Sedgwick, Paranoid Reading. Existential isolation is surely meant here as depressive, existential isolation and the isolating peculiarity of human consciousness but in the socio-cultural context of neoliberalism and within the specific space of affective anxiety during the 1990’s when Wallace did much of his reading and thinking, it can be interpreted more broadly. Fiction can interrogate and intervene upon a
troubled culture, it can poke holes in the fabric of a neoliberal apparatus and serve as a space in which to exert resistance. As we’ve seen, however, the terms and the potential of that resistance were set, in large measure, during the intra-anxiety period by the specific affective hauntings of the rise of consumerism and the collapse of the narrative logics of the Cold War and an unmooring of organizing narrative logics. Turning now to another form of complicated resistance during the period, we will examine, briefly, music and youth culture and the troubled possibility of resistance, of “reparative reading.”
Part III
Conspicuously Young Part II: Music, Affect, & Resistance

Sociologist Ryan Moore engages with the same historical present to examine how punk music, punk culture, and heavy metal attend to the postmodern condition, and he looks further at how the influence of capitalism and commerce complicated the struggle to establish a “culture of authenticity” through a network of underground media. Punk subcultures, he asserts, are a response to the crisis of meaning in the condition of postmodernity.

Postmodernism, says Moore, is characterized by the exhaustion of totalizing metanarratives; in New York City, he says “postmodernism developed as cross fertilization among art, music, fashion, and the intelligentsia” (14) amid the bleakness of the 1970’s. For Moore affect has a double meaning, “referring to an emotional state or dramatization of the self (to cultivate an affectation) and a capacity to influence or understand the process of causation (to affect change).” For Moore, the postmodern subject experiences affect, specifically Jameson’s “waning affect” in both senses of the word; he “becomes emotionally numb or at least strikes a pose of indifference and senses an inability to cause change or comprehend cause and effect.” The two are connected because the inability to imagine a different world, David Harvey’s city that can be re-made in our own image, results in a predisposition for self-reflexive irony. It’s the irony
that saturates the comic end of postmodern and blank fiction (DeLillo, Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Bret Easton Ellis) and the punk aesthetic sensibility.

Ironists, Moore contends, are “experts in deconstructing how images are fabricated and they know that everyone is trying to sell them something.” The postmodern condition is deeply tied to the economic condition of post-Fordism and global late capitalism. The waning of affect, he posits, is “particularly evident within contemporary rock music and youth culture,” and he locates a “significant rupture in the affective possibilities of rock music and youth culture with the failure of Sixties utopianism and the emergence of punk as a form of cultural opposition divested from any sources of hope” (16). For Moore, the “blank” in blank fiction is a disassociated affect that is inherent in the motional detachment of postmodern life “reinforced by the constant commercial solicitation of young people.” Their media savvy complicates the project of marketers who co-opt ironic language and style or strive to embody signifiers of authenticity that subcultures have produced in their attempt to carve out a different space. This tension troubles the postmodern culture industry and music in particular.

Music communicates at an affective pitch – evoking moods and emotions rather than ideas – and can be an emotional register for social change. “Music’s affective significance can be measured in terms of rhythm and noise,” both in the literal sense and in the “different roles of music in society and social change.” Noise “disturbs and disrupts.” Rhythm, cyclical, “works through social space to cement social relationships.” Moore sites Henri Lefebvre’s theory of “rhythmanalysis” that “situates itself in the juxtaposition of the physical, the physiological and the social, at the heart of daily life. Lefebvre believed that capitalism has sought to replace the rhythmic, cyclical experience
of time embedded in nature and the body with a quantifiable sense of linear time more amenable to work schedules and commodities” (19-20). It is in this context that we can look at youth music culture that attended to the postmodern condition, be it hardcore punk, heavy metal, or the grunge, alternative and riot-grrrl music of the 1980’s. The music and the subculture that coalesced around it were constantly troubled by these complexities of capitalist logics.

Punk came to symbolize the “god is dead” neoliberal moment of 1970’s post-Fordist, postmodern culture. It was a death of idealism, the double bind of Berlant’s cruel optimism kicking in. Inherent in the late-capitalist logics it was reacting to were market forces that quickly absorbed it, causing its initial iteration to implode, quickly leaving MTV and the sanitized New Wave music of the 1980’s in its wake. However, its reverberations persisted. At the same time that the kids were clamoring for their MTV the punk ethos lived on and took on new forms generating new scenes and new kinds of music. In Washington, D.C., the band Minor Threat became a preeminent voice in one strand of one corner of punk known as “hardcore.” Hardcore was faster, louder, younger, and angrier than punk had been. Shows could be violent, the culture was male-dominated, and strands developed that were overtly racist. However, another strand galvanized by the Do It Yourself (DIY) ethic of punk staked out a decidedly different cultural space. An explicit reaction against the nihilism embedded in the postmodern condition and in the cruel optimism of capitalism, Straight Edge culture rejected “the whole hedonistic consumer lifestyle of sex, drugs and rock n’ roll. Sobriety and abstinence could now be revamped as acts of nonconformity” (Moore, 59).
The DIY ethic in Straight Edge was both rhythm and noise; it sought to disrupt the dominant values of the culture through dissonant, loud music and to provoke a coherent ideological rhythm to provide a critique of the dominant culture. Ian MacKaye, the front man of the Washington, D.C., band was the first to articulate this message in the song Straight Edge:

I'm a person just like you.  
But I've got better things to do.  
Than sit around and fuck my head.  
Hang out with the living dead.  

Snort white shit up my nose.  
Pass out at the shows.  
I don't even think about speed.  
That's something I just don't need.  

(Chorus)  
I've got a straight edge.  

I'm a person just like you.  
But I've got better things to do.  
Than sit around and smoke dope.  
'Cause I know I can cope.  

Laugh at the thought of eating ideas.  
Laugh at the thought of sniffing glue.  
Always gonna keep in touch.  
Never want to use a crutch.  

This presents a critique not only of dominant commercial society but of drug-infused punk culture as well. Here is the possibility of true resistance within the infernal cycle of the postmodern condition. A taking back of affect, it is a stark contrast to the blank, “pretty vacant” affective tenor of 1970’s punk aesthetics and blank-fiction. It creates a space for a positive political engagement and the potential to make life style choices – veganism and vegetarianism, for example – that displayed a concern for animal rights and
the environment. It also sought to achieve commercial independence, linking itself, in this sense, to the utopian idealism and the folk music scene of the 1960’s. Physically and ideologically, separations between musicians and audiences were challenged. Physically, because bands played in small venues to intense audiences with a profoundly participatory dance culture, and ideologically, because bands and audiences created their own labels, their own media through self-published magazines (fanzines or zines) and their own networks of distribution.

Straight Edge became a social movement that pivoted around core principles of “clean living, positive attitudes, resistance to social pressures and community” (Haenfler, 63). Ross Haenfler argues that movements like Straight Edge “include identities that shape people’s lives in the most personal ways, while simultaneously making a collective statement,” and thus posit a model of resistance that is a direct reaction to the double-binding cruel optimism of the irony and market-logics of late capitalism, neoliberalism, post-Fordism, and the postmodern condition.

This is a superficial analysis of the potential and the work of Straight Edge. There were strands that were fundamentalist and deeply violent, strands that were co-opted by mass, commercial culture, and the perceived progenitor Ian MacKaye certainly does not see the movement – indeed, any “movement” at all – as a realization of the lyrics he articulated in the song “Straight Edge.” “When I wrote the song ‘Straight Edge’ I wasn’t writing about something new,” MacKay said in a 2010 interview. “I wasn’t saying, ‘Hey, here is a new way to live!’ I was talking about the way people live to begin with. Later I read about the ‘straight edge lifestyle,’... [a] problem I see associated with the ‘straight edge lifestyle’ is that it becomes a framework for merchandise.... People look for things
to signify their lifestyle choices. I cannot believe it when I see straight edge merchandise! Its just mindboggling” (MacKay, 2009). MacKay has spoken out against the violent and fundamentalist strands of the movement as well: “The reason why the people who had issues with violence managed to dominate the whole idea of straight edge was that our cultures are obsessed with violence.... The whole idea of straight edge was incredibly maligned by a small amount of people. It became vulnerable because everyone was gathered around one tree” (MacKay, 2009).

Another youth music genre to emerge out of the embers of the 1960’s and 70’s was Heavy Metal. Symbols of countercultural rebellion had traveled beyond bohemian coastal enclaves and resonated with a working-class culture that had a tradition of rebellion and mistrust for middle-class ideology. Ryan Moore points out that these traditions carry with them “persistent elements of hyper-masculinity and patriarchal gender roles, militarism and xenophobia, and fear of racial and sexual difference” (77). Heavy Metal was a marriage of the counterculture and the working-class culture of the time; it originated in the 1970’s with bands like Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, and Deep Purple and developed a style that infused hippy stylistic signifiers (e.g., long hair and blue jeans) with a hyper-masculine biker machismo. The aesthetics of the scene were laden with spectacles of power: “blood, fire, smoke, and make up, thus codifying heavy metal as not only a style of music but also a theater of fantasy and horror.” In the 1980’s, the music became increasingly associated with the occult (Iron Maiden, Judas Priest) and new strands (thrash, speed metal, glam metal) emerged (Moore, 77-79).

A complex relationship developed between Heavy Metal and its audience and it is impossible, according to Ryan Moore, to fully understand the music and subculture
without a class analysis. “Heavy metal emerged from the intersection of working class
culture and the counterculture amid deindustrialization during the 1970s and 1980s”
(Moore, 80). It was an emasculating time for many who could not find work and when
the work itself, with the loss of manufacturing jobs, threatened previous notions of
masculine labor. Previously, teenage boys who felt that the educational system failed
them could rely on a factory job and a stability that would wait for them when they left
school; this was no longer the case, and many looked to the future as “animals before an
earthquake,” according to sociologist Donna Gains. In this context, Moore posits that
“heavy metal’s iconography ... objectified socioeconomic sources of disempowerment in
images of evil, chaos, and destruction beyond human control…. In heavy metal, ominous
yet anonymous forces of destruction overwhelm their victims, taking the shape of
inhuman, supernatural, or mythological beings whose wrath is unstoppable” (Moore,
112). This sensed feeling of ominous dread is the collective affective tenor of a period of
profound instability. Heavy Metal is yet another illustration of an affective response
(theatrical, angry) to the culture, attending to a particular historical present – postmodern,
post-traumatic, post-Fordist.

The examples above, in the cutting-edge literature of the 1980’s downtown scene
and two genres of youth music of the era, illustrate divergent affective responses to the
condition of postmodernity in the 1980’s. Each has embedded within it a possible way
out of the double bind of Lauren Berlant’s cruel optimism. There is the blank space in
blank fiction that invites the reader to identify and attends to the very impossibility of
deep and authentic human connection that the literature pivots around. There is the
political idealism in the rhythm and noise of Hardcore Straight Edge music and ideology,
and despite the working-class despair associated with much of Heavy Metal, it can still be “a cry of protest against power,” a re-colonization of affect that can be harnessed for positive change. In its evocation of mythic imagery, there is, too, the possibility of connecting with something deeper in the human mythic consciousness. All of the examples in this archive were born from the punk music and punk culture that grew out of a profoundly unstable moment in late capitalism of waning affect and postmodernity.
Conclusion

We have in the preceding pages glanced at the tip of the iceberg of a complex, intrinsically problematic project. I have tried to argue for a periodization of the 1990’s and posited a unique register of affective anxiety. We have looked at the American field, though we could easily have turned our gaze outward and explored the broader geopolitical field. In particular, a comprehensive project would attend to the rich, mutating literary affect in the countries of the Eastern Block following the collapse of the Cold War. Nowhere was the effect of the Cold War felt more acutely then in the USSR and its satellite countries and nowhere has affect been more deeply managed through a web of biopolitical tactics. I’d suggest, if we were to expand the lens of the project, that we look closely at the stunning example of emotional life under Stasi rule in the GDR. We could examine, as a case in point, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s 2006 film *The Lives of Others*, which depicts a monochromatic, paranoid cultural and emotional life under close surveillance, underwritten by insidious, draconian, state spying during the Cold War. It would provide a case-study involving multiple prongs of the thesis that we have been working with: the administration of affect through biopolitical means and of the import of a flood of information during the postmodern turn, which our writers, Don DeLillo, Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, and others have continually interrogated. “The Stasi had so much information that everyone was an enemy, because
everyone was under observation” (Funder, 266). Indeed, “in its forty years [the Stasi] generated the equivalent of all the records in German history since the Middle Ages” (5). In the History of Sexuality, Foucault traces for us an ur-flood of information in his genealogy of statistics and population management; he contends that, in the Victorian era, statistics and population became political and economic problems. “Governments perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with ‘people,’ but with a ‘population’ with its specific phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation.” (25). Foucault gives us tools for thinking through the biopolitical work of information. In its postmodern form, information is made surreal; it shorts-circuits and becomes a flood of “White Noise,” in DeLillo’s formulation. In the case of the GDR, information overload and surveillance are the tools by which the emotional lives of people and the affect of a culture are governed.

In the context of the GDR, “to let live and make die” is a constant and material threat. In the previous examples, we examined the spectral haunti}ngs of the Cold War. The GDR had its own set of haunti}ngs: World War II, the psychic complexity for the German people of the Holocaust, the spying “ghosts” that literally stalked the most pedestrian and private moments. Further, if we examine the era with attention to the postmodern turn that has been theorized by Jameson, Baudrillard, and others, we would need to look at the Stasi’s fabrication of reality: “it was rumored that the Stasi orchestrated the funeral, to the point of substituting an empty coffin for a full one…. [Imagine] paid-off pallbearers pretending to struggle under the weight of an empty coffin, or perhaps genuinely struggling beneath a coffin filled with eighty kilos of old
newspapers and stones. [Imagine] not knowing whether your husband hanged himself, or whether someone you now pass on the street killed him” [Funder, 9]. The profundity and the psychic stakes of postmodernity’s disorientation from reality couldn’t be more stark. Attending to the trauma as the era came to an end amid chaos and confusion would be necessary if we were fully to examine affect in the fallout of the Cold War.

Periodization is problematic, in part because the nature of this project—an examination of threat, attention to hauntings, trauma, nostalgia, and memory—revolves around a collapsing of temporal thresholds, “a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward” (130), in Sedgwick’s words. Underworld, too, articulates the mesh of time: “stop everything for half a second, atomic clocks, body clocks, the microworld in which physicists search for time … run it backwards … rewind … life” (237).

If we were to dig deeper into the American field of cultural production, we would look to further evidence of Cold War preoccupation and hauntings in the 1990’s: e.g., Norman Mailer’s 1991 Harlot’s Ghost, a tome, which, like Underworld, takes on the totality of postwar America, in this case through the lens of the CIA; or the hit series The X-Files which, it could be argued, re-imaged the now absent communist threat as an alien threat and imagined a government, like the Stasi, that deliberately orchestrated reality, bathing in paranoia.

I’ve tried in this brief conclusion to pull our camera backward and touch on what the larger canvas of this project might look like in an attempt to better contextualize it and argue for its scope. We’ve looked too at modes of resistance, through literature and through music, attempts to carve out authenticity and critical interrogation. In so doing I
hope that I’ve established the material stakes of this project and the ultimate contention
that, amid this curious nebulous web of affect, postmodernity, and trauma, all of which is
underwritten by political reality and biopolitical structures, resistance is nonetheless
possible.
Works Cited


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