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This dissertation uses trauma theory, theories of labor, bureaucracy, and late capitalism, as well as critical theory to analyze contemporary office work in the US, revealing an interrelated system of cultural and economic oppression and trauma for the white-collar worker. A bureaucratic modality structures day-to-day existence and is intertwined with late capitalism, as these structures are the "rational" means of achieving capitalism's demands for productivity and maximum profit, revenue, or bureaucratic information from expendable workers. The effects of this are not immediately apparent but take the form of slow violence, often resulting in delayed trauma responses. Office work in particular obscures this violence as the shift to an information economy has created new forms of stress and injury which are not necessarily physically apparent. The white-collar worker, as they appear in contemporary American literature, is rarely offered an escape from the drudgery of their labor. It is through the medium of literature that the workers' suffering is expressed and reflected back to the reader, offering a mediated and momentary glimpse of the Real that confronts the reader with their position in late capitalism and exposes a fissure in late capitalist ideology to a mass audience. This dissertation considers how this fissure is revealed in Wallace's *The Pale King*, Phillips' *The Beautiful Bureaucrat*, Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, and Ferris' *Then We Came to the End*. The radical alterations in the white-collar workforce as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests the potential for a new literary form for representing, discussing, and critiquing labor through the workplace novel, and this dissertation provides new intersectional strategies for future analyses of literary depictions of labor.

“EITHER WAY I’M DEMOTED TO A TINY CUBICLE:” A TRAUMATIC ENCOUNTER
WITH OFFICE WORK, BUREAUCRACY, AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY IN
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

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For Kimberly, Cheri, and Jo.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Purpose

This dissertation aims to synthesize four core concepts: **trauma**, **bureaucracy**, **late capitalism**, and **the culture industry**, enriching each field by examining selected novels in a new context. Wallace's *The Pale King*, Phillips' *The Beautiful Bureaucrat*, Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, and Ferris' *Then We Came to the End* are mass-market paperbacks, something the publisher's target reader might grab off the shelf at an airport bookstore, or find through a review blurb in a newspaper. Despite Wallace's legacy garnering attention for *The Pale King* and Whitehead's rising position in BIPOC literature, there is little scholarship on these texts, let alone a reading of them together in the context of both trauma and late capitalism. This dissertation will, I believe, let us better understand the intersection of the key concepts in a rapidly evolving work culture which often neglects employee health, be it physical, psychological, or emotional, in pursuit of innovation and profit. My approach will enrich the fields of trauma, labor, and cultural criticism in their overlap, offering an examination of literature focused on bureaucratic and office work, subjects which are popularly dreaded and mocked. As my analysis shows, the dread and derision are not necessarily without merit; however, the human element of labor in these environments is under immense strain and suffering for it. It is through expressions of suffering in select characters where, for a brief moment, readers catches a glimpse of the possibility of escape from late capitalist and bureaucratic modality; an "encounter with the Real" which quickly retreats after confronting readers. The radical alterations in the white-collar workforce as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests the potential for a new literary form for representing, discussing, and

critiquing labor through the workplace novel, and this dissertation's framework provides new intersectional strategies for future analyses of literary depictions of labor.

As Studs Terkel declares in the introduction to his anthology of conversations with the American working class about their labor: "This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence" (Terkel xi). It is in this spirit that this dissertation continues, trading Terkel's 20th-century Americana for open office plans, standing desks, Zoom meetings, and Salesforce analytics.

Relevance

To answer the crucial question "why these novels, and why now?" I would like to turn to Alain Badiou on the arts in particular. In *Philosophy and the Event*, Badiou denotes art as a condition of philosophy. Speaking on the "artistic event," Badiou outlines what constitutes the "artistic subject" and the development of truth through art:

I propose thinking of the subject constituted in art by the artistic event as consisting precisely of the system of works. The artistic subject is constituted by works or by groups of works . . . Truth is here the generic set of the evental consequences of these mutations of art. It's a sequence of a specific art. There is, for example, a truth of the resources of sound discovered by serial music. What's interesting, and what appears to be more discernible in art than in the other conditions, is that the evental mutation renders the truth of the sequence that precedes it. (Badiou and Tarby 69-70)

A cluster of contemporary novels about office labor, such as the ones used for this dissertation, offer potential for an event which creates a new form for representing, discussing, and critiquing labor. Although its long-term impact remains to be seen, the COVID-19 pandemic has radically altered the workplace at present, and is perhaps the catalyst for the form of the workplace novel to change and produce new subjects. This cannot be recognized except reflexively, but in light of the ongoing "Great Resignation" as it is termed by organizational psychologist Anthony Klotz, it appears that the workforce *has* been radically altered and will

continue to “mutate,” revealing that the workplace novel has realized a new modality of suffering to express (NPR).

Alain Badiou’s essay “What Does Literature Think?” argues that in creating “something finite (artificial) to rival the infinite (natural),” it is in literature’s production of the finite which “constitutes thought” (“What Does Literature Think?” 134); in other words, that “it opens up the realm of the particular — subtle psychological insights, social differences and cultural specificities — to the field of knowledge” (133). Literature must think something *beyond* both itself and “not from the empirical world” to be successful, using language “for what it is capable of saying . . . for what it has not yet said, or what it has always been reluctant or unable to say” (137). As a related concept, Adorno argues in *Negative Dialectics* that, in the speculative moment, freedom of thought comes from allowing an expression of suffering, as it sets the conditions for truth, or a momentary break in ideology (*Negative Dialectics* 17-8). It is not merely that suffering equals truth; rather, giving suffering an opportunity to speak allows for truth to be spoken. This dissertation is ostensibly about bureaucratic literature, but at its core is the examination of daily expressions of anguish increasingly shared across the world, one Excel sheet at a time.

I understand the core concepts of this dissertation as interlocking pieces of a puzzle. Each piece has its own history of scholarship and ongoing discourse, tied to a variety of disciplines. Starting from Wallace’s *The Pale King*, I find these pieces not only fit together, but bolster one another seamlessly. The “pieces,” or concepts of **trauma**, **bureaucracy**, **late capitalism**, and **the culture industry** are tightly enmeshed, affecting employees and consumers alike. Depending on circumstances, some of these pieces may appear more prominent than others, but they are always working simultaneously. A significant subtopic I am using to augment trauma is the notion of “slow violence,” which occurs over years, decades, centuries, or longer, often starting

imperceptibly. The way in which these pieces come together is best encapsulated in the subject of the novels I have selected: the rank-and-file office worker. Information and data have emerged as a leading source of capital within late capitalism, and this economic form increasingly merges with bureaucracy, even in non-government form, as a management solution. Pressures of productivity mean that workers spend long hours poring over paperwork or at computers, creating physical or psychological ailments which are not immediately apparent, and the slow violence of this labor can lead to a variety of potential traumas. Work does not necessarily end outside of the office, particularly as work-from-home options and “flexible schedules” demand constant availability from distrustful management unable to constantly supervise employees on-site. The workers are also bombarded by ideological demands from the culture industry through communicative technologies, erasing the distinction between work and leisure time through mechanisms such as unified email inboxes for work and personal use, or teleconferencing software used for work meetings and to stay in touch with family.¹ Workers are pressured to be more productive in order to make more money, in turn using this income to raise standards of living and engage in conspicuous consumption, with targeted advertising suggesting products to buy based on the data-capital of the consumer.

¹ See Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again. At the same time, however, mechanization has such power over leisure and its happiness, determines so thoroughly the fabrication of entertainment commodities, that the off-duty worker can experience nothing but after-images of the work process itself . . . The only escape from the work process in factory and office is through adaptation to it in leisure time” (109).

All of these pieces interlock around the personal and professional lives of workers who, with a nearly-vanished notion of a true “middle class” in the US, ensuring a cycle of physical and psychological suffering with few opportunities for escape. These pieces, represented in the selected novels, contour the topography of American “white-collar” rank-and-file under late capitalism, returning to the audience a guarded image of themselves in the Real; as characterized by Žižek, “the destructive Void” (*Desert of the Real* 13-14).²

Bureaucracy is the core modality of daily life, with rules and regulations governing political structures, consumer goods, natural resources, the font size of this text, and so on. The term bureaucrat is rarely, if ever positive, typically expressing the disdain and hatred of government workers asking for endless paperwork. Yet bureaucracy is not exclusive to government, nor does it consist of “faceless” and entirely unfeeling automatons, despite popular cultural conceptions. The novels analyzed in this dissertation depict bureaucrats and office workers in a variety of jobs, all of which exploit and grind down their very human employees in myriad ways. According to Weber, bureaucracies are the “means of transforming social action into rationally organized action” (*Economy and Society* 987). Politics and corporations fall

² Žižek is characteristically inconsistent and uses conflicting terms here, but I prefer to invoke “Void” or “fissure” rather than a “Real Thing.” As Žižek notes, defining the Real as a tangible *Thing* which is “too horrible for us to look at directly” would not entirely be appropriate (*Desert of the Real* 39). However, I disagree with his conception of a Thing which would be “a fantasmatic spectre whose presence guarantees the consistency of our symbolic edifice, thus enabling us to avoid confronting its constitutive inconsistency” (39). Rather than articulating the Real as a Void/fissure, Žižek’s Thing turns it into an ideological function, rather than something to be revealed *out of* ideology, which is what I argue my selected texts do. For further discussion on Žižek’s conceptualization of the Real, see Flemming (2015).

naturally into bureaucratic structures as they are the *rational* means of effecting results. The problem that immediately crops up, however, is the intersection of bureaucracy with late capitalism, demanding efficiency and maximum profit from labor at the expense of the worker.³

While bureaucracy appears to be an inefficient system, Weber argues that it is actually the *most* efficient system for human activity and necessary for both capitalism and socialism's development, in the sense that "enterprises and the state [must be] organized as dependable, predictable bureaucracies" (Swedberg and Agevall 20-1). Industrial capitalism, Weber states, requires a predictability only offered by "modern bureaucratism" to function at its peak (*Economy and Society* 1095). In terms of profit, one can simply examine any health insurance company in the US to see the effectiveness of a bureaucracy in extracting billions of dollars from an industry. This is not to say that government bureaucracy is anywhere near as efficient; however, the IRS must function to extract revenue, as unlike a business, the government cannot simply liquidate its assets and cease to exist. Government bureaucracy is not necessarily profit-motivated when in the form of public service, and an increasingly prevalent attitude towards government bureaucracy to run it "like a business" misses the point of a public service entirely.⁴ What I am arguing is not that government bureaucracy is necessarily concerned with profit as an end goal; instead, I am positing that the modality of bureaucracy has merged with late capitalism to create an ideological push for maximizing the potential of employee labor to produce results, which is to say, justification for the continuance of a bureau in the overall budget through

³ The definition of "late capitalism" will be fully unpacked in my core concepts section. Briefly, I am utilizing Jameson's definition as it follows from the Frankfurt School.

⁴ See the IRS "Free File Alliance" system of Public-Private Partnership and the "Taxpayer First Act" of 2019.

revenue, if not outright *profit*. This revenue and/or profit is in the form of information. The tradeoff between an “efficient” and “inefficient” bureaucracy depends on the level of documentation and subsequent motivation of employees. As Novaes and Zingales argue, bureaucracies which are concerned with extensive documentation and therefore deemed “inefficient,” are functioning as intended in the role of “mechanism[s] to generate information” (Novaes and Zingales 247). This recording of information “allows for input-based measures of performance that increase the effectiveness of the firm’s system of incentives” (257).

Conversely, when “streamlining” a bureaucracy, the following occurs:

[A] less bureaucratized firm has to rely more strongly on broader measures of performance (e.g., profits) to motivate the employee. This system of incentives is likely to be disrupted by managerial turnover . . . To maximize her bargaining power vis-à-vis the board of directors, it is then in the manager’s interest to bias the firm’s organization toward very little record keeping. (246)

If, as Novaes and Zingales suggest, incentive schemes within bureaucracies can be more effectively driven without “efficiency” by meticulously evaluating input performance rather than raw profit, then the pressure for employees to perform to their fullest extent – even in the seemingly stagnant government bureaucracies – still exists. The labor here is in *generating information*, and in the largest of bureaucracies, the labor of *documenting* this form of labor is perhaps more consuming than the original role of the office itself. Nonetheless, bureaucracy demands a constant, albeit dull, form of labor.

As the labor market shifts from manufacturing goods to an information economy, the toll of increased productivity becomes apparent in the forms of psychological and cultural trauma

which are not immediately apparent.⁵ The novels selected for this dissertation highlight issues of class, race, gender, labor, and trauma within a late capitalist and bureaucratic framework, compounded by issues of cultural and ideological self-perpetuation identified in Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of the culture industry. This dissertation considers representations of contemporary American labor through a Marxist lens with special attention to "slow violence" as a narrative device, and the distancing effect of the novel medium which allows readers to encounter the same horrors of the characters. These novels also offer instances of escape, through what Adorno describes as the expression of suffering, or through some form of personal fulfillment. While alternatives to the dreaded "9 to 5" are possible, as C. Wright Mills argues, "[i]ncreased awareness is not enough, for it is not only that men can be unconscious of their situations; they are often falsely conscious of them" (Mills xix). Even as these novels present the drudgery of office work to readers, the culture industry smooths over the content as mere fiction or entertainment — a mass-market paperback to take to the beach on a hard-earned vacation or peruse and "wind down" in the spare moments of leisure before bedtime.

The Fictitious Middle Class

Generally speaking, across the novels discussed in this dissertation, workers often fit what Mills describes as the "white-collar man" in American society:

He is more pitiful than tragic, as he is seen collectively, fighting impersonal inflation, living out in slow misery his yearning for the quick American climb. He is pushed by

⁵ An economy wherein information replaces material goods as commodities, distinct from Unger's conception of the "knowledge economy" which — reductively — places the development of knowledge at the center of the economy, with goods and services developing in new ways as a result. Unger sees a potentially positive restructuring of the economy and labor through the "knowledge economy;" I use the term "information economy" to describe merely a means of reification (data) for profit.

forces beyond his control, pulled into movements he does not understand; he gets into situations in which his is the most helpless position. The white-collar man is the hero as victim, the small creature who is acted upon but who does not act, who works along unnoticed in somebody's office or store, never talking loud, never talking back, never taking a stand. (Mills xii)

Even in 1951, Mills recognizes that the notion of the “middle class” is fiction: “If [workers] aspire at all it is to a middle course, at a time when no middle course is available, and hence to an illusory course in an imaginary society” (ix). Only the workers in *Then We Came to the End* approach an idealized “middle class” status, but this is accompanied by immense paranoia over job insecurity where at any moment their car payments or mortgages may become impossible to meet. Even lucrative work means living paycheck to paycheck to maintain a certain standard of living, forever chasing promotions to earn just a little bit more for a coveted commodity. Each novel presents endless chains of superiors, and the superiors become more indistinct and unknowable the further up they are from the rank-and-file employees depicted in the novels. With few exceptions, the workers herein find themselves unable to pursue their own goals and find their free time, if any, occupied by either thoughts of work or financial insecurity as a consequence of work. Mills's description of the white-collar worker's position as “helpless” is apt, even on a smaller scale than Mills suggests: the workplace carries into the personal life until it is all-consuming. Characters in the selected novels are “heroes as victims” in the sense of doing their jobs and complying with what management asks them to do, being “acted upon” and passive for fear of unemployment or missing out on a promotion. Their primary motivator is maintaining financial stability, which is routinely a struggle. Yet even if characters do attain higher levels of income, this does not mean that they are happy; rather, research suggests eclipsing the supposed “middle class” status and driving further ahead provides an increasing sense of well-being, reinforcing the ideological drive to work even more in the hopes to attain a higher rank and more wealth.

Recent income and satisfaction studies have re-evaluated Kahneman and Deaton's popular 2010 findings, which argue that "[e]motional well-being also rises with log income, but there is no further progress beyond an annual income of ~\$75,000 . . . high income buys life satisfaction but not happiness, and that low income is associated both with low life evaluation and low emotional well-being" (Kahneman and Deaton 16489). Contrary to this, Killingsworth's much larger 2020 meta-study asserts that there "was no evidence for an experienced well-being plateau above \$75,000/y . . . There was also no evidence of an income threshold at which experienced and evaluated well-being diverged, suggesting that higher incomes are associated with both feeling better day-to-day and being more satisfied with life overall" (Killingsworth 1). Even after basic needs are met and the "middle class" wealth goal achieved, Killingsworth's findings show that "experienced well-being rises linearly with log income, with an equally steep slope above \$80,000 as below it" (1). The U.S. median household income in 2018 — "true middle" so to speak — is around \$48,500, not adjusting for localized costs of living (Bennett et al.). Bennett et al. note that a "middle class" income in San Francisco is approximately \$63,800, against a Jackson, Tennessee income of around \$39,300 (Bennett et al.). Both of these numbers are well below the \$75,000 mark of Kahneman and Deaton, but as to what exactly the incomes are spent on each year is unclear; rather, the measurement of "emotional well-being" relies on many factors, a number of which are accounted for in the 2010 study, but it is impossible to objectively qualify all factors of human life. Nonetheless, the relentless accumulation of wealth is a great motivator to accumulate more wealth, with no amount satisfying anyone completely. Of note is that Killingsworth finds that "two households earning \$20,000 and \$60,000, respectively, would be expected to exhibit the same difference in well-being as two households earning \$60,000 and \$180,000, respectively" (Killingsworth 4). To increase feelings of satisfaction, then, the amount of wealth amassed must vastly increase to produce a noticeable

difference from a lower salary, effectively making the “ceiling” unlimited. So long as there are raises to pursue, people will continue to work for promotions in efforts to secure a better sense of well-being; however, as the novels herein demonstrate to varying degrees, worker exploitation and worries over salaries both contribute to forms of trauma as manifested in an evolving capitalist system.

A Brief History of Office Work

Dealing with the IRS, the DMV, telecom companies, call centers, and so on, is an endless source of jokes and dread. Culturally speaking, bureaucrats are derided as “faceless cogs,” perpetually asking for more forms, directing people to wait in different lines, asking for more sources of identification, and generally being difficult and unsympathetic representatives of whatever institution employs them. But what about being on the other side of the counter, or perhaps stuck at a desk, universally despised by the public? When directly interacting with a customer, bureaucrats are the most convenient synecdoches for the public’s frustrations. As discussed amongst employees in *The Pale King*, “we’re just the most convenient incarnation of what they hate” (*Pale King* 137). This project seeks sympathetic portrayals of bureaucrats and office workers in an attempt to humanize them and account for fictional depictions of the toll of such work, and in particular, the shift to an information economy.⁶ Before unpacking key terminology and concepts, a short history of the office from around 1900 to present is necessary.

⁶ Despite Sullivan’s good intentions in characterizing bureaucratic workers as participating in a “creative and discursive process,” I find extreme fault with the characterization of said bureaucracies nobly existing without a “profit motive” (Sullivan 1). Bureaucracies cannot operate as negative-sum entities, requiring some form of profit to be sought utilizing a labor force which, frequently through necessary cost-cutting measures, is exploited to maximize revenue.

While bureaucratic structures existed long before the advent of the office proper, the major shift of workers into the office occurred around the turn of the 20th century (Saval 36). Evolving out of the clerking profession as technological developments allowed higher communications volume, office workers initially clustered in major cities before moving into suburban business parks around the mid-20th century, particularly after the success of AT&T's Bell Labs complex in New Jersey (147). Corporate campuses shifted to promote a "lifestyle" following Google's lead in the early 21st-century, where "[y]ou shouldn't ever have to leave the campus to do the work you want; in fact, with endless amounts of free snack food and treadmill desks, you pretty much never have to leave, even to sustain your own biological existence" (287). Saval notes that the purpose of Google's campus is "to make the normally wrenching transition from university life to corporate life as seamless as possible" (287). Yet the holdout of management's mistrust towards unsupervised work coupled with the demand for innovation from employees can lead to massive design flaws in the office:

For example, following the MIT professor Thomas Allen, who famously discovered that interactions decrease exponentially the farther people work from each other, designers have tended to cram people together — something that not so incidentally decreases costs exponentially — while making nominal gestures towards private space. The result is noise and distraction . . . In one study, a shared space at a media agency was passed through constantly, but there was no combustion of innovation flames, as the collaboration ideologists always hope. There was too much traffic in general, and the agency's director was often in the space having coffee, which made junior workers fearful of being overheard. (296-7)

As office designs fluctuate, so does the technology to force "productivity," such as logging cursor movements or keyboard strokes and penalizing workers who do not keep in constant motion (Hardy). Even before the significant rise in work-from-home models, monitoring software has been in place. Third-party monitoring companies capitalize on employer distrust but also employee frustration, making a profit off of selling automated screen captures back to employees so they can block out non-work activity before employers review them (Hardy). The

office, among other institutions, radically changed due to COVID-19 in 2020, with technology developing at a rapid pace to facilitate working from home while office buildings sit empty. Due to this dissertation's composition overlapping with the COVID-19 pandemic, this issue cannot be fully discussed, nor can the long-term effects on the workplace be accounted for; however, urban planning idealists were recently experimenting with ideas such as a "15-minute city," in which "almost all residents' needs can be met within 15 minutes of their homes on foot, by bike, or on public transit. As workplaces, stores, and homes are brought into closer proximity . . . this allows residents to bring their daily activities out of their homes . . . and into welcoming, safe streets and squares," blurring the lines between work and leisure to the extent they are practically indistinguishable (O'Sullivan and Bliss). This conceptual city would allow for a tighter integration of workplace and home, facilitating an easier transition to hybrid models of work-from-home and office labor. If workers are able to utilize the same outdoor spaces owned by their employer's campuses for recreation and an alternative to cubicles, the distinction between work and leisure collapses, ensuring that everyone is a so-called "company man" reliant on their employers for even the control of the natural world.

In addition, "[h]ospitality brands like Starbucks, CitizenM and Mandarin Oriental have been experimenting with converting local coffee shops and hotel floors into workspaces that can be booked by the hour or day. And city governments are working to redistribute jobs and services across residential neighborhoods" (Poleg). Looking forward regarding working from home, the "Survey of Business Uncertainty," conducted in a joint effort between Stanford, the Chicago Booth School of Business, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, found employers predicting "that post-pandemic, 27 percent of their full-time employees would continue working from home, most for a few days a week" (Miller). Survey findings from the National Bureau of Economic Research indicate that as of early-to-mid 2020, between 36 and 40 percent of

businesses surveyed expected that at least 40 percent of their employees would be working remotely beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartik et al. 4). “Highly educated industries” allowed for the most employees to work remotely, while “less educated workers” were far less likely to be allowed to work remotely (3). “White collar industries,” the study notes, more easily facilitate working from home (2). With companies such as Google repeatedly pushing back and modifying the return to the physical workplace until “conditions allow” (Elias) and Slack offering a permanent work from home option, the future of the office is unclear and cannot fully be accounted for in this dissertation (Hartmans).

While the office is a nebulous concept at present, this dissertation focuses on in-office experiences, ranging from an implied mid-20th century setting through a contemporary corporation. Each of these offices is an excruciating place for employees due to workplace culture, coupled with demands for productivity. No matter how dingy or prestigious the office, employees approach them all with a sense of dread. *The Pale King* and *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* focus on the tedium of forms and routine, while *The Intuitionist* delves into the intertwined issues of race and capitalism, and *Then We Came to the End* explores the endless paranoia over wealth and rank. Rarely do characters escape or modify their circumstances to enjoy the tasks they perform.

“The Human Problems”

Elton Mayo’s 1933 publication *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization* contains a study detailing the seemingly idyllic Western Electric Company, lauding the efforts of the company to support its workers, but finds faults with administrative methods which lead to frustration and decreased morale. Mayo summarizes the Company in terms of its good standing, perks, and amenities:

In respect of hours of work and wages the Company stands above its compeers. It has provided a restaurant in which good food is obtainable at moderate prices . . . There is an excellently appointed hospital, adequately equipped, and staffed by medical officers of high qualification. The personnel division makes use of every established method of vocational guidance in an effort, which statistics show is highly successful, to suit his work to the worker. There has been no strike or overt symptom of discontent for over twenty years. There can be no question that the general morale, in any accepted meaning of that term, is good and that the Company stands high with its employees. I have not mentioned the various thrift and investment plans which the Company organizes for employees, the vacation provision or numerous other evidences of an unmistakable determination to fulfil humane intention to the utmost. (Mayo 99)

Despite all of these positive attributes, conflict nonetheless arose when a worker lacks “sufficient understanding of his work situation . . . unlike a machine, he can only work against opposition from himself. *This is the essential nature of the human; with all the will in the world to coöperate, he finds it difficult to persist in action for an end he cannot dimly see*” (emphasis mine, 119). Attempting to impose an “economic logic of production” onto a “non-logical social code” developed through human interaction and collaboration, with considerations for individual circumstances outside of the workplace, results in “personal exasperation caused by a continual experience of incomprehension and futility” (120-1). Employers and workers come into conflict when the “human problems” are neglected to pursue “economic innovation.” Mayo calls for development of a new form of administration to bridge this gap, educated and oriented towards the “human problems” inherent within companies; effectively, Human Resources.

Despite the evolution of Human Resources departments throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, there are very few instances of HR involvement in this project’s selected novels.⁷ The push to work and cut costs without consideration of employee welfare runs rampant. A rather

⁷ For more comprehensive overviews of HR and its “epochs,” see McKee (1997) and Watkins and Dalton (2020).

extreme example in history, which encapsulates the raw spirit of employer-employee relations in these novels, is the Ford Hunger March in 1932.⁸ When auto industry workers attempted to march and present demands to Henry Ford in the aftermath of the Great Depression, they were met with violent resistance from police, Ford security, and Harry Bennett, the head of Ford's rudimentary HR "service department." Among the 14 demands of the marchers were "to rehire the unemployed, provide funds for healthcare, end racial discrimination in hiring and promotions, provide winter fuel for the unemployed, abolish the use of company spies and private police against workers, and give workers the right to organise unions," particularly after the average annual wage decreased from \$1,639 to \$757 for those lucky enough to remain employed (Watkins and Dalton 31). What transpired was a violent clash, culminating in Bennett driving into the crowd and firing his gun towards the marchers, even after their retreat, inspiring the police and company security to use lethal force as well (31). The spirit of pure antagonism and lengths gone to protect the employer have since become much more passive, as seen in *Then We Came to the End*, where employees experiencing personal crises are referred out to a psychiatrist for a chemical solution. Nonetheless, despite rebranding and new approaches, HR's approach to "the human problems" first and foremost protects the interests of the company and therefore the "innovation" Mayo references.

⁸ This is nothing to say of Ford's sinister "Sociological Department" which engaged in "enforced integration" of immigrant employees to a specific vision of American middle-class standards (Loizides 119). Ford stipulated – and enforced, through an investigative team – household standards, hygiene, and marriage, among other things, to qualify for the touted "five dollars a day" wages (Snow): "Those that were deemed insufficiently healthy or moral were immediately disqualified from the wage" (Manokha).

As Kathryn McKee argues for the future of HR, “HR can be profit-oriented, and through expert program design, its goal to retain every profit dollar possible can be achievable, spending few if any on litigation, compliance reviews, or unnecessary staffing expense” (McKee 154).

Raymond Hogler, noting the shift from permanent employees to contracted workers, advocates for HR evolving to accommodate nonemployment contracts as:

strategies for avoiding employment relationships pay greater dividends. When those strategies at the same time minimize problems of control, the nonemployment labor contract becomes a sound tactical vehicle for *getting work without getting workers*. (emphasis mine, Hogler 86)

As the “gig economy” becomes an increasingly popular model, companies can divorce themselves further from responsibilities towards their source of labor. As the supposed go-between for management and employees, HR is firmly on the employer’s side, adding yet another layer of management for employees to navigate particularly in times of personal crisis. Even HR itself is being outsourced to contracted employees, such as the company models of Bambee (Bambee) and Gusto (Gusto), wherein an HR manager can be assigned to a company remotely as opposed to being directly involved in day-to-day business.

As HR evolves, methods of enforcing compliance with company policy are increasingly digital, ranging from surveillance to facial recognition and biometrics, along with social media campaigns to bolster a company’s image and, in some cases, discourage unionization.⁹ As technology becomes more sophisticated, its deployment to monitor employees becomes more insidious and difficult to detect; alternatively, technology can be outright brazen in implementation when a company has effectively monopolized an industry, no longer needing to

⁹ Of note is Amazon’s “Fulfillment Center Ambassadors” social media program implemented in 2018. See Hamilton (2018), Ivanova (2021).

fear disruption by the workforce. The standard “performance review” is being replaced with “always-on” monitoring of metrics (Watkins and Dalton 99). This results in situations such as warehouse workers at Amazon “having to urinate in bottles or rubbish bins because they fear that a bathroom break would take too long and would cause them to miss their strict targets” (106). Watkins and Dalton propose the “Paradox wave” as the next step in HR, where companies must balance a focus on “people” and inclusivity against the success of profit-oriented business models. The authors predict radical company restructuring and the disappearance of HR, as it has traditionally existed in a “department,” with the overarching goal of “human development rather than increased exploitation and inequality in the workplace” (127). This is certainly not to say that all companies evolve at the same time; rather, that success will come from a natural progression in accordance with cultural expectations. The implications of this predicted shift are a more subversive system of employer-employee relations, as the core function of HR cannot change; only its methods and appearance. The “disappearance” of an HR department will not alter the foundation of capitalism it was built on, and only serve to diffuse the functions through a broader section of a company. Capitalism’s inherent inequality and exploitation mean this next wave of HR cannot function in any meaningful way, particularly as we have seen with contemporary events such as #AppleToo and the “Google memo.” Any efforts to shift HR into the “Paradox wave” can only result in cosmetic changes, placating workers just enough to quell dissent and save face without changing the underlying ideological failures.

The core relationship between employers and employees as developed over the 20th century comes in the form of Human Resources, managing the “human problems” that employees bring to the company. In compartmentalizing the emotional aspect of employee relations to a department operating in the interests of management and public relations, the divide between routine work and executive “innovators” has never been more stark. The

COVID-19 pandemic, in forcing workers out of the cubicle and into isolating home offices, may well be a turning point in employer/employee relations as Telehealth services boom and some workers find flexibility; others, of course, will find invasive monitoring software scrutinizing every minute for maximum “productivity” metrics, assuming the worst of employees not under management’s direct supervision. Whatever the future, the “human problems” will always remain, to the company, just as they are so named: “problems.”

Concepts and Descriptions

This dissertation works with four core concepts: **trauma**, **bureaucracy**, **late capitalism**, and the **culture industry**. All of these interlock in each novel and together have profoundly negative effect on the characters. Other topics such as race, gender, labor, and suffering are included in the discussion; however, I give primacy to the core concepts as they are shared by my selected texts and the latter topics work as natural augmentations. This theoretical frame I am establishing works as the aforementioned interlocking pieces which mutually reinforce one another, contouring the material conditions of the American office worker in late capitalism. This section outlines each concept and subtopics of each.

Trauma

The term “trauma” is difficult to elucidate in contemporary discourse. Broadly speaking, Crownshaw states a general critical consensus for the term: “trauma is that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation” (qtd. in Bond and Craps 4). Trauma as a whole cannot be pinned down to any particular definition, as the field is perpetually evolving and reevaluating itself; as such, several different theories of trauma are utilized in this dissertation. The idea of some form of trauma arising from office work may rightfully seem absurd and overblown. The common thread across the novels I have selected, however, is psychological and physical deterioration resulting from work and culture, as well as corporate

and material conditions. Trauma takes many forms and produces many different effects, ranging from the immediacy of a traumatic event, to a “return of the repressed,” and what I will argue, an ongoing and subtle cumulative effect in the form of what Rob Nixon terms *slow violence*. It is useful to consider slow violence as a traumatic form of violence, in the sense of Rothberg’s arguments on trauma theory’s role in global issues: on a macro scale, we are implicated in the perpetuation of late capitalism and the necessity of bureaucracy, imposing this schema in various forms through Empire.¹⁰ On a more immediate scale, slow violence is a useful concept for considering the cumulative effects we see in these novels, where certain characters spend weeks, months, or years on the job suffering under the material and cultural conditions of late capitalism. The traditional dynamic of perpetrator and victim is abstract, and there is often not a singular event as a referent; therefore, the concept of slow violence is necessary to my argument.

A variety of theoretical approaches are employed here, accounting for the development of trauma theory and debate around the field. The range starts with Freud and Janet in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, through Caruth’s immense influence in the 1990’s and onward, and up through contemporary discussion of trauma such as Naomi Mandel’s reexamination of trauma theory’s legacy. Subtopics include Rob Nixon’s *slow violence*, *collective trauma*, *cultural memory*, and Adorno’s concept of *suffering*. I will utilize Erikson’s distinction between *individual* and *collective* traumas for the purposes of this project, as both often occur simultaneously:

A person who sustains deep psychic wounds as the results of an automobile collision, for example, but who never loses touch with the rest of his community, can be said to suffer from a form of individual trauma. But a person whose feelings of well-being begin to deteriorate because the surrounding community is stripped away and can no longer supply a base of support — as often happens in slum clearing projects, for instance — can be said to suffer from a form of collective trauma. In most human

¹⁰ See Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.

disasters the two traumas occur simultaneously and are experienced as two halves of a continuous whole. (*Everything In Its Path* 154)

Erikson provides this distinction, despite the typical concurrence, as individual traumas can be worsened without a sense of communality. Quite often we see workers traumatized by their individual tasks, but it varies as to whether or not the office or community as a whole can provide a supportive environment or identity through the shared experience of trauma. My methodology for assessing trauma in each novel, or even on a character-by-character basis depending on their circumstances, will vary; however, the concepts of individual and collective will primarily frame the analysis.

The overarching concept of *slow violence* is more the mode in which trauma takes place herein, as trauma lingers and builds within characters and workplaces often until a specific event brings the underlying trauma to a more “dramatic head,” or very visible behaviors. An advantage, and also disadvantage, of trauma in literature is the limited time spent with characters and finite conclusion of the narrative. Readers cannot get an oral history or perform archival work related to a fictional workplace, nor, unless a sequel is written, can they follow the characters beyond the conclusion of the text. Unlike more traditional case studies, such as in Erikson or Browning, the limits of the text offer only a fixed telling of events. Even with multiple character perspectives, to account for all potential factors in trauma is impossible in a fictional text, as one cannot uncover new material over time. Cases like Browning’s can be revised and annotated with future discoveries; the standalone nature of the novel – which is fictive – does not permit this, so my discussions of trauma are necessarily limited by the focalization of each text.

Bureaucracy

The term “bureaucrat” first appeared in English print in 1832 (“bureaucrat, n. and adj.”), following “bureaucracy” in 1815 (“bureaucracy, n.”) and “bureaucratic” in 1800 (“bureaucratic, adj.”), indicating the systems were in place before a term arose for the particular type of worker, which is “frequently *depreciative*” (emphasis *OED Online*, “bureaucrat, n. and adj.”). While traditionally associated with government work, I am using the term bureaucracy more broadly to mean a hierarchical system within both corporate and government offices, which features aspects of — but not exclusively — rank, tedious work (both paper and digital), and subdivisions of labor tasks through “departments” and the like. Corporate bureaucracies are featured in *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* and *Then We Came to the End*, while government bureaucracies are the focus of *The Pale King* and *The Intuitionist*. None of these bureaucracies are quite the same, but the workers are all affected by forms of trauma that are related to the office cultures in which they operate. On a basic level the *OED* offers several definitions, but these only partly cover the selected novels. Firstly, bureaucracy is “[g]overnment by officials; a system of government or (in later use) administration by a hierarchy of professional administrators following clearly defined procedures in a routine and organized manner” (“bureaucracy, n.”). Second, and more applicable to this dissertation, is a “state, institution, organization, etc., which is governed or run by bureaucrats” (“bureaucracy, n.”). More often than not, the characters discussed are not in managerial roles, nor do they set policy, nor are the rules and regulations particularly made clear in the texts. Characters function within what are bureaucracies, be it government or corporate, but the intensity of rules, regulations, and types of labor performed are not consistent. For this reason, I defer to Graeber’s description of a “distinctly American form: corporate — bureaucratic — capitalism” (Graeber 12). Public and private operations are not as distinct as we might envision, and bureaucratic forms are “natural” structures that both government and corporate

operations fell into for the initial sake of efficiency, but as the form held over, became bloated and cumbersome operations. This form is even exported to the “third world” (as described by Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*) in such enterprises as call centers, and bureaucratization of the global economy is an ongoing process in the private sector. As Graeber argues: “This process — the gradual fusion of public and private power into a single entity, rife with rules and regulations whose *ultimate goal is to extract wealth in the form of profits* — does not yet have a name” (emphasis mine, 17). This is my primary concern in the novels, as it relates to labor and trauma: profit (or revenue) against individual fulfillment. For now, the unnameable will use “bureaucracy” as a placeholder, since it is outside the scope of this dissertation to create a new theory of bureaucracy. Each novel approaches the sense of profit/revenue differently, but it is always present in some form, even in governmental roles. The distinction put forth by Noaves and Zingales between “efficient” and “inefficient” bureaucracies is useful here as all of the bureaucracies function to generate information in various forms, although the extent to which documentation takes up labor time varies between novels. *The Pale King*, for example, is a very “inefficient” and meticulous government bureaucracy full of paperwork; conversely, the ad agency in *Then We Came to the End* is an “efficient” bureaucracy in that it sheds most documentation elements, but as a result suffers from volatile incentivization and turnover.

Late capitalism

This project uses Jameson’s description of late capitalism, evolved from the Frankfurt School’s outline from earlier in the 20th century. Jameson readily admits that “there is no ‘late capitalism in general’ but only this or that specific national form of the thing,” acknowledging an “Americanocentrism” in his work (Jameson xx). For the purposes of this dissertation on contemporary American novels, the issue of “Americanocentrism” is worth noting, although the cultural and economic conditions on display do not present a conflict with a U.S.-centric

definition. Jameson evaluates the Frankfurt School's use of the term as follows: "(1) a tendential web of bureaucratic control . . . and (2) the interpenetration of government and big business" (xviii). The contemporary usage of late capitalism, however, is "not merely an emphasis on the emergence of new forms of business organization . . . but, above all, the vision of a world capitalist system fundamentally distinct from the older imperialism" (xviii-xix). Jameson continues by observing that:

Besides the forms of transnational business mentioned above, its features include the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers, and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale. (xix)

Late capitalism does not merely mean a post-industrial economy, but a broader cultural shift and a "retroactivity" of the present moment, realizing all the mechanisms which came together to form what is now known as late capitalism. A gradual and subversive shift, late capitalism also includes (though the term is not explicitly mentioned by Jameson) the *information economy*, wherein the exchange of data as a commodity takes primacy, such as Facebook's monetization of user demographics, locations, and "interests," among other things, which are exchanged for profit. This progresses naturally into the **culture industry**, where consumers are not only told what to desire, but how to desire, as their personal information is used to tailor advertising and commodities or services to increasingly specific subsets of consumers, perhaps even down to an individual level. Economic and cultural structures begin to meld, and the term late capitalism "seems to obligate you in advance to talk about cultural phenomena at least in business terms if not in those of political economy" (xxi).

Culture Industry

As described in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the **culture industry** is a social, economic, political, linguistic, artistic, and technological unification resulting in an "unending sameness" (Horkheimer and Adorno 106). It is "a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need . . . For the present the technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardization and mass production and sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of the work from that of society" (95). Horkheimer and Adorno are primarily concerned with entertainment as the driving force behind this unification, describing the core mechanic:

Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again. At the same time, however, mechanization has such power over leisure and its happiness, determines so thoroughly the fabrication of entertainment commodities, that the off-duty worker can experience nothing but after-images of the work process itself. (109)

The **culture industry** needs less and less to hide itself, as its domination is so complete. Since the publication of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1947, mediums of entertainment have changed but the principle remains. Digital technology and the shift from manufacturing to an information economy have created a present-day circumstance wherein workers are always within reach of the office, even at home, through email and phones. Media is on-demand and tailored to individual consumers, such as Spotify playlists for at the desk, or instructional videos on how to replace a toner cartridge (after ads, of course). Workers can pay extra for tiers of increasingly commercial-free entertainment in streaming services, but TV shows, films, podcasts, and other forms of media still prescribe a structure of consumption, mediate life events, and offer product placement. Office workers return home from staring at computer screens during work hours to stare at yet another screen for entertainment during "leisure" hours, and the work/leisure distinction has been even more eroded than Adorno and Horkheimer could envision, if it is not gone entirely. Work technology, such as Zoom or other videoconferencing

software, is used to stay in touch with family, just as email clients can merge inboxes between work and personal affairs. While the Frankfurt School were not luddites — particularly in Benjamin’s assessment of communism “politicizing art” against fascism — the **culture industry** appropriated technology so effectively and thoroughly that “no limits are set to cultural progress” (115). Connecting concepts are *labor* and *leisure*, along with *fantasy*. Several characters discussed in this project are robbed of their ability to engage in *fantasy*, which I use in the Lacanian sense as a defense mechanism, and are therefore subjected to frightening encounters with the Real, along with the concepts of *desire* and the *objet petit a*, linking back to **trauma**. Fantasy is crucial to a person’s well-being, and being robbed of this ability is detrimental to psychological health. Lacan “compares the fantasy scene to a frozen image on a cinematic screen; just as film may be stopped at a certain point in order to avoid showing a traumatic scene which follows, so also the fantasy scene is a defence which veils castration” (Evans 60). Castration in Lacan is not the literal physical act; rather, the phallus exists in a symbolic sense. Castration is, to be necessarily reductive for the sake of scope, the “prohibition of jouissance.” This means that fantasy is required to protect us from encountering the threatened loss of, roughly speaking, enjoyment (“it is Jouissance whose absence would render the universe vain”) (qtd. in Fink 126). As workers begin to lose their ability to engage in fantasy, the prospect of losing all enjoyment becomes a reality.

Notes of a Critique of “Traditional” Marxist Theory

As this dissertation utilizes Critical Theory, it is necessary to address developments in Marxist theory, and in particular, Moishe Postone’s book *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. Postone posits a rethinking of “traditional Marxist theory,” but this is difficult to elucidate. For one thing, the Oxford *Dictionary of Critical Theory* states that as “there is no one form of Marxism, so there is no one form of Marxist criticism” (Buchanan 320); *The Penguin Dictionary*

of *Critical Theory* that Marxism “takes many different forms” (Macey 241); and Hitchcock’s essay on Marxism from *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Literary and Critical Theory* that “[a]ttempting to frame the extent and breadth of Marxist literary criticism is as daunting as offering to encapsulate the complex contours of Marxism itself” (Hitchcock 59). Each definition takes pains to acknowledge multiple strands of Marxist thought, from political, to economic, to the arts, and beyond. Pinning down “traditional Marxist theory” is by necessity reductive, and while I feel that Postone offers compelling insights into issues with some strands of Marxist theory, the points raised with Critical Theory are incorrect in their assumptions about immanent critique.

I examine novels in terms of power structures between employer and employee, along with alienation of labor and the value of labor. As discussed in Adorno and Horkheimer, capitalism is entirely capable of self-preservation and teaches its subjects not only *what*, but *how* to desire. Yet as Postone points out, even critiques that account for broader contexts of cultural and sociopolitical forces cling to:

[A] transhistorical conception of labor . . . understood in terms of a goal-directed social activity that mediates between humans and nature, creating specific products in order to satisfy determinate human needs. Labor, so understood, is considered to lie at the heart of all social life: it constitutes the social world and the source of all social wealth. (Postone 7-8)

Postone argues that rather than position Marx’s critique of capitalism from “the standpoint of labor,” contemporary Marxist theory should shift to conceptualizing Marx’s critiques as that of “labor in capitalism” (16). As Postone explains:

[Marx’s] focus on labor in capitalism does not imply that the material process of production is necessarily more important than other spheres of social life. Rather, his analysis of labor’s specificity in capitalism indicates that production in capitalism is not a purely technical process; it is inextricably related to, and molded by, the basic social relations of that society. The latter, then, cannot be understood with reference to the market and private property alone . . . [this reinterpretation] also suggests that the working class is *integral* to capitalism rather than the embodiment of its negation. (16-17)

Rather than a more “traditional Marxist” view wherein the dialectic resolves with the working class reclaiming the means and mode of production from the upper class, Postone’s model falls more in line with Gorz in the sense that a post-capitalist society will be a freedom *from* labor as typically conceived, citing the *Grundrisse*: “A necessary material condition for the full development of all individuals is that ‘labor in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased’” (qtd. in Postone 33). The nature of “alienation,” then, becomes one wherein “people do not really control their own productive activity or what they produce but ultimately are dominated by the results of that activity” (30). This moves beyond physical products of labor and into “abstract social domination” which must resolve in the “material *abolition* of proletarian labor” (emphasis Postone 33).

This dissertation engages in a complex relationship with the transhistorical conception of labor and traditional Marxism that Postone describes. Office work in the selected novels, particularly informatics and bureaucracy, is not “an activity that mediates the interactions of humans with nature,” nor do the novels resolve in terms of reclaiming production (59). Instead, there exist a select few characters I will highlight who are able to achieve forms of self-fulfillment, running counter to the system of social domination that capitalism perpetuates. These novels are subversive because they suggest that labor can exist as something other than a means of economic production, instead serving the development of human beings outside the demands of the workplace. Subversion is not as simple as picking up a hobby; instead, it manifests itself as labor in the interests of the individual *outside* of the sphere of production.

Attempting to define “traditional Marxism” is a difficult task, and Postone’s conception is necessarily reductive, creating issues when it comes to Critical Theory. While Postone articulates insightful and worthwhile disputes with Critical Theory which cannot be thoroughly

discussed within the scope of this dissertation, it is crucial to discuss the main point at which Postone finds fault with Critical Theory: that “conditions of an adequate immanent critique are not fulfilled by the social critique from the standpoint of ‘labor’” (90). In particular, Postone argues this ineffectual basis can be found in Adorno’s “On the Logic of the Social Sciences,” and the notion of “immanent critique [revealing] the gap between the ideals and the reality of modern capitalist society” is therefore inherently flawed by presuppositions of labor (Postone 89n8). In rebuttal, however, Bonefield’s assessment of Postone’s work finds a fundamental flaw:

Postone’s insight that capital “refers to a contradictory and dynamic structure of alienated social relations constituted by labor,” is important. If, however, “one speaks of labour, [then] one is dealing immediately with Man himself. The new positing of the question is already its solution.” Postone’s substitution of the critique of capital with a theory of capital and a critique of labour, belies this insight. (Bonefield 121-2)

Bonefield, again invoking Marx against Postone, notes that “already the simple forms of exchange-value and of money latently contain the opposition between labour and capital” (qtd. in Bonefield 121). Would it not be possible, in the vein of Critical Theory, to form an immanent critique of capital from within the standpoint of labor as Postone conceives of it? Postone’s assertion that “overcoming capital cannot be based on the self-assertion of the working class” (Postone 371) is succinctly addressed by Arthur:

Capital rests ultimately on proletarian labour — “hence,” Postone argues in a wonderful *non sequitur*, “overcoming capital cannot be based on the self-assertion of the working class” (p. 371).

Of course it can! — if workers assert themselves as the human beings they are in addition to bearers of labour power. Postone speaks as if capital has successfully reified the capital relation — as if workers could not possibly think in *and against* the value form. (Emphasis Arthur 152).

While Stoetzler, yet another critic, attempts to semantically pick apart Arthur’s Frankfurt School counter of Postone, Arthur’s point of immanent critique remains a legitimate weak point in

Postone’s dismissal of the methodology as an inadequate way to utilize Marx.¹¹ For the purposes of this dissertation, then, Postone’s argument against the efficacy of Critical Theory is a moot point, as immanent critique is very much a possibility from the standpoint of labor. It is still worthwhile to consider the implications of a transhistorical conception of labor; however, it is not necessarily an impediment to immanent critique.

This critical discussion is relevant to white-collar workers because it offers perspectives regarding the potential for what the future of labor may hold. Capitalism’s ideological death grip is unlikely to relent; however, with work models shifting to work-from-home and hybrid, along with the increasing prevalence of four-day workweek trials and outright resignation from the workforce, it is important to consider the theoretical implications of workers gaining some bargaining leverage on the job market, and as employees of Amazon and Starbucks have recently demonstrated, renewed and emboldened interest in labor unions and collective action.¹² The recent Alphabet Workers Union at Google, while unable to “collectively bargain over pay and benefits,” is nonetheless an example of corporate organization in early stages (Allyn).

Chapter Summaries

As I will show in the chapters that follow, the interrelated core concepts work to illuminate the plight of the American office worker through the selected novels: a workforce physically and mentally deteriorating from late capitalism’s slow violence, suffering traumas from abusive work environments with few, if any, options to leave. To interpret these concepts, I

¹¹ Stoezler takes issue with defining terms such as “self-assertion,” “in addition,” and most of all, “self;” however, Stoezler immediately proceeds to use the term “*self-sublation*” accompanied by the specific German term “*Selbst-Aufhebung*” without offering a succinct standalone definition of “self” outside of specialized jargon.

¹² See Mellor (2022).

incorporate various strands of psychoanalysis and trauma theory, along with Weber's theories of economic development, and a Marxist lens which includes both Horkheimer and Adorno under the Critical Theory umbrella. I view my approach as being primarily from the intersection of Freud and Marx and the influence they exert on subsequent theorists in a variety of disciplines. What this offers broader scholarship is a close reading of texts through an interdisciplinary framework which will help us make sense of the tiresome pre-COVID office culture to which we were accustomed and examine how late capitalism's ideology has spectacularly failed the white-collar worker, while at the same time enriching the fields from which I am drawing on by putting them in conversation with one another. None of the theoretical approaches themselves are new, but my framework creates a way to illuminate these texts in a previously unseen light, and perhaps act as a basis for examining the upcoming generation of COVID-era workplace novels, be they nostalgic, critical, or addressing the new modalities of work-from-home or hybrid models of work.

This dissertation consists of four main chapters, each on a novel about bureaucrats or office workers enduring their daily labor. The first of these chapters is on David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, an unfinished novel comprised of narratives woven around an IRS Regional Exam Center in Illinois. I argue this novel shows the effects of late capitalism in an information-based economy through the depiction of bureaucrats working at the IRS, with a totalization of work life over personal life, even in thoughts, and physical and mental deterioration. Wallace's positioning of the bureaucratic world as parallel and intersectional with the real world is an apt basis for considering the bureaucratic modality's inescapable nature and effects on everyday life.

All of the core concepts are equally present in this novel. It begins with an intertextual comparison to Kafka's *The Castle*, drawing parallels nearly a century apart of inner versus outer workings of a bureaucratic system, and merit- or skill-based mobility against a form of

predestination which permeates Wallace's work. The section "Humanizing The Boredom Gauntlet" examines Wallace's description of the IRS attempting to shift its bureaucratic form to become more "human," reflecting Gorz's criticisms of attempting to humanize objectives through humanizing work: it is self-defeating for the IRS to adapt to the consumer, creating more bureaucracy and complexity for what results in a sort of "mutation." The section moves to discuss boredom and tedious tasks, and how employees are pressured to perform quickly and accurately no matter the difficulty of the tax return forms, making the tradeoff between speed and thoroughness a tough decision. Tied into this is a discussion of merit and predestination, particularly of the Manshardt infant, who illustrates Althusser's concept of interpellation by being primed for a management role even before it is able to form coherent speech. This section concludes with the critical conversation of Ralph Clare who notes moments of surprise among stretches of monotony for both the characters and the readers, offering rewarding respites from the slog of work.

In "Inputting Numbers, Outputting Decay: Trauma and Office Work," I begin by outlining a brief history of trauma theory and its developments from Freudian models into contemporary interdisciplinary methodologies, and the importance of Vickroy's argument for conceiving of trauma as driven by collective and situational circumstances with regard to fiction. Vickroy's argument illuminates Wallace's approach to his narrative and provides for a reading beyond "traditional" trauma theory based in Freud, although Freud is not to be discounted entirely. Vickroy also addresses the relationship between trauma in a text and its relation to the reader, and I use this to accentuate the narrative thread of Dean's boredom in particular, as he begins to contemplate suicide while processing forms at his desk. This transitions to an analysis, through Horkheimer and Adorno along with Lacan's concept of fantasy, of how exactly Dean is being traumatized at work during what are supposed to be moments of relaxation and free

thought. I conclude with a discussion of Taylorism and how trauma and even death are accepted as the cost of improving productivity, as seen with Garrity. “Bureaucratic Entities and Exploitation” delves into Wallace’s §10 on the nature of a government bureaucracy through an elaborate analogy, and proceeds to read bureaucracy through Graeber, incorporating a discussion of violence as it manifests from bureaucracy and the state. I turn to Weber’s theories of how bureaucratic structures form, and in particular, how their formation links to political organization, capitalism, and exploitation.

In “Variants of Violence and Alienation,” I open the discussion of Nixon’s slow violence, and Galtung’s distinctions of violence, to parse out the need for using the term “slow violence” in particular. Trauma is inflicted in the modality of slow violence, I argue, by the conditions of late capitalism itself, causing workers to deteriorate over time almost imperceptibly with physical and psychological issues, augmented by a strong sense of alienation imposed by the IRS’s employee identification system. “Information, Immaterial Labor, and Keeping Costs Down” discusses the transition from an industrial to an information economy, utilizing Lazzarato to highlight the importance of “immaterial labor” skills which are at the core of this dissertation’s novels. In tandem, I incorporate Hardt and Negri’s definition of immaterial labor to look at broader implications of the shift to an information economy, such as the control of knowledge. I conclude the section with an analysis of the Utility Examiners, who are exceptionally talented and willing to work temporary positions at posts, losing promotion opportunities. This illustrates the “law of one price,” discussed in Žižek, as the most cost-effective way for the IRS to operate under a late capitalist model.

The final section is “Politics and Posthumanism: Becoming the Machines.” I start with a close reading of the Exam Center’s director DeWitt Glendenning, whose thoughts on the IRS’s role between the government and the people are unusually introspective and educated, invoking

Rousseau and de Tocqueville. Wouters's posthumanist approach to Glendenning's remarks are incorporated as they identify a conflation of human and machine throughout the text, particularly regarding workers, enhancing my discussion of bureaucratic structures and work's effects. I use Badiou's remarks on the idea of "the people" against Glendenning's civics discussion, and then address several IRS publications related to automated processing systems and human involvement in examining returns, concluding with a brief mention of the IRS's "human" outreach through collections, which identifies ideal candidates as enforcers of morality in a civic system.

The next chapter is on Helen Phillips' *The Beautiful Bureaucrat*. Similar to *The Pale King*, I argue it shows the effects of late capitalism in an information economy through a protagonist whose life is consumed by the concept of "bureaucrat" with physical and mental deterioration. The protagonist is in a contemporary setting and living paycheck-to-paycheck, reflecting a post-2008 reality of employment for many, with as many personal hardships as at work. As the conclusion leans towards genre fiction, the novel suggests a world run entirely by bureaucracy with life and death premeditated, taking bureaucracy a fantastical step further from my argument of an all-encompassing ideological system to a biological one. The critical concepts foregrounded are bureaucracy and trauma, with late capitalism and the culture industry taking a lessened role. Opening with "The Dirty Blvd.: Poverty Wages and Induction," I outline the circumstances of the impoverished protagonist and her acceptance of a bureaucratic job necessitating secrecy, reading this through Wallace's notion of secrecy as inherently interesting as opposed to a transparent bureaucracy, which is boring and can obfuscate its actions through boredom. The section "Deterioration: Trauma and Decay on the Job" describes the nature of Josephine's labor and her relationship with the Database against the paper forms she checks. As this process continues, Josephine begins to experience the slow violence of bureaucratic trauma,

and I begin to incorporate the notion of the “unspeakable” and Josephine’s embrace of the term “bureaucrat” as a significant moment for her character development, using it to ground her position within late capitalism. “Mutations and Permutations: Trauma and the Real” continues this discussion, invoking Freud’s concept of the uncanny and bringing back Lacan’s concept of fantasy to illuminate the effects of bureaucratic office work on Josephine’s psychological state. I then discuss the concept of the Real, utilizing Žižek’s registers of the Real to identify Josephine’s location within the “real Real,” which does not allow access to structural fantasy and traps Josephine in the nightmare world of the text. This transitions back to Freud and Forter’s argument on delayed trauma, showing the significance of Josephine accepting the label of “bureaucrat” and the word’s ability to summon latent trauma into existence. I put this in conversation with Stampfl who uses the term “retrodetermining” to identify this effect, bolstering the emphasis of how it is not the “unspeakable” which is important; rather, it is the uttered word which realizes trauma.

The following section, “Reconsidering the Unspeakable: A Necessary Discussion of Privileging in Trauma Theory,” introduces the discourse around a key issue I have encountered in trauma theory, particularly with the more traditional schools of thought such as Caruth’s. Using Naomi Mandel’s argument against the “unspeakable” as a starting point, I incorporate Stampfl’s reaction to N. Mandel, and Leys’s critique of Caruth, to interrogate traditional models of trauma theory and “witnessing.” I use this to pose the question, based on N. Mandel, “what happens when a *rhetoric of trauma* is applied to late capitalism,” which is in a reductive sense, what I am attempting to do through my framework. I make a clear distinction between my work on workplace settings and trauma theory’s grounding point in the Holocaust, stating my unease with the necessity of such an extreme referent which trauma theory declares necessary to work from, before reprising Hardt and Negri for a sense of global trauma caused by late capitalism’s

reach. “Suffering at Arm’s Length: Keeping the Reader from the Text’s Trauma” opens with Nietzsche along with Horkheimer and Adorno on encountering art and absurdity to establish the novel’s subversive abilities, and how it is able to bring “the horror of existence” through “culturally-approved” channels to a mass audience. This continues into the ways in which Josephine’s work illuminates Lyotard’s questions of knowledge in the information economy, as decisions about knowledge have already been made and commodified, and Josephine is employed to process these decisions to ensure their execution. Once Josephine realizes her role in the deaths of others by processing their forms, she begins to experience various psychological defense mechanisms, which I outline through A. Freud and S. Freud.

“Witnessing and Abstraction: Expressing Suffering” opens with Vogler on expectations of witness literature and how it functions, and the ways in which this novel is an abstract form of witness literature. Josephine’s story illustrates the complexities of Vogler’s argument, and I use Vogler to transition to Adorno on the concept of suffering, and how the novel’s status as art allows it to – without claiming moral status or immunity to critique – reveal suffering and truth about the social conditions of late capitalism. “Final Blows: Terminations” is a close reading of the text’s conclusion, emphasizing Josephine’s role as a bureaucrat, the “expected” role for her to fall into, and the final bodily trauma of immediate violence inflicted on her by the very system she upheld.

The following chapter is on Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*. I argue that while this novel is more unconventional, it shows an important intersection of race and capitalism in a bureaucratic setting, highlighting structural oppression and exploitation built into this system. This novel provides one of the best “ways out” through personal fulfillment and potential for transformative change by operating outside the boundaries of late capitalist ideology. The core concepts of late capitalism and trauma are foregrounded, with the culture industry and bureaucracy in lesser

roles. I start with “A Necessary Discussion of Whitehead’s Language,” establishing Whitehead’s very deliberate linguistic choice of the term “colored” in the novel, and why this is important to the narrative. I reference Hurston’s essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” as a literary antecedent through which Whitehead’s use can be read in nuanced terms. This transitions into the novel itself and how language associated with Lila Mae’s methodology of elevator inspection is Othering. The next section, “‘Suggestive and Evocative Rather Than Definitive:’ Vaguerly, Authenticity, and Obfuscation in the Text,” discusses Whitehead’s deliberate lack of a central referent for time and place, with a close reading examining how Whitehead utilizes this tactic to blend fact and fiction, leveraging this into questions of authenticity which run throughout the novel. I discuss how this is analogous to the founder of the Intuitionist school of thought beginning his project as a joke, then realizing it has truly transformative potential. “Authenticity: ‘What Does It Matter Who Is Speaking?’” addresses the debate around Lila Mae’s voice in completing Fulton’s project, referencing Russell’s reading through Gates’s *Signifying Monkey*, and denoting where my analysis of Lila Mae’s actions differ in how she moves towards achieving a form of authenticity. This is done through reading Fulton’s works as illustrating Benjamin’s concepts of ritual and political bases for art, and Lila Mae’s continuation of this work into a Foucauldian mode of authenticity. This invites more critical debate around the novel with Johnston, Berlant, and Selzer’s discussions of how Lila Mae’s continuation of Fulton’s work complicates the conclusion of the text. I argue for a consideration of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, and that Fulton’s Intuitionism seeks to escape the burden of objectivity, seeking freedom through an expression of suffering.

The following section, “The Complications of Identity Politics and Domination,” engages with Haider’s consideration of the term “identity politics” and how the concept has come to perpetuate capitalist oppression. I intersect this with Weber and Althusser, arguing for the

consideration of Ideological State Apparatuses to be bureaucratic formations, incorporating Weber's concepts of "domination." "Bureaucracy, Exploitation, and Ostensibly Progressive Values" returns to the subject of workplace environments, looking at Dobbin's analysis of "inclusive practices" and their failures, which are manifest in Lila Mae and Pompey's positions in the Department. Both are exploited for political gain by members of the Guild and the competing elevator companies, and historical trauma causes a rift between the two characters, as I demonstrate through close reading of their antagonistic relationship. "'Passing' and Profit" ends this section with a close reading of the characters Raymond Coombs/"Natchez" and Fulton in terms of "passing," and the capitalist exploitation of characters deemed "Other."

The final chapter is on *Then We Came to the End*. My argument here is that this novel features a non-government bureaucracy in a loose sense — more on the side of office work generally — but it is very much a processor and manufacturer of information for the culture industry, demonstrating immense pressures to achieve performance goals and maintain standards of living under late capitalism. It shows a potential for escape but this escape is perhaps a duplication of the same conditions oppressing Carl to begin with. While almost the entire novel is set in the office, and workers frequently have to take overtime and weekend hours to complete campaigns, they thrive in the office while avoiding work as much as possible, reveling in the workplace culture while simultaneously deriding it. The concepts of late capitalism, trauma, and the culture industry are most prominent, with bureaucracy taking a small role. I start with a return to the concept of the "unspeakable" with Ferris' omission of September 11th in the text, which illustrates the argument of Laub on temporal distance from a traumatic event and its effects on memory and truth. I do an intertextual comparison with Wallace's "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" and the ability to engage with traumatic events in a meaningful manner. I offer a counterargument through Caruth on narrative breaks, transitioning to Jansen on the

novel's "refusal of 9/11 representations." Jansen's insights on the narrative style are important to the critical conversation around the text; however, the conclusions drawn are a point of contention between Jansen and myself regarding the problems with "unspeakability." "The Bureaucratic Detective" begins with a close reading of the office furniture paranoia and "the bureaucrat" investigating furniture assignments. This segues into a discussion of the office's "natural state" as one of perpetual fear, particularly with ongoing layoffs, even though the employees work to perpetuate the culture industry and late capitalism through advertising campaigns which are always in demand. The next section, "Labor, or Lack Thereof," is a short section of close reading on the day-to-day activities of the workers and their immense efforts to avoid work as much as possible, emphasizing the importance of "looking busy" rather than being productive.

"Perpetuating the Culture Industry" addresses the primary narrative of the novel: a pro-bono ad campaign for breast cancer, with the goal of making breast cancer patients laugh. The absurdity of the campaign greatly vexes the workers as they are used to marketing products or services by creating desire and demand; core tenants of the culture industry. I use this campaign to complicate Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of the culture industry as the ad campaign lacks any prior referent with which to remind the public of a company, product, or service, resulting in "advertising for advertising's sake," marking the end of the company. The next section, "Power Dynamics: With Us or Against Us" centers around the character Joe Pope and his quasi-management status, resulting in a great sense of distrust from his fellow office workers. I use Maxey's argument on narrative use of a "we" pronoun to establish this contentious relationship as it is crucial when discussing Tom Mota later in the chapter. I transition into inter-office dynamics and ways in which management uses meaningless titles to keep workers divided amongst themselves, unable to collectively exercise power because of attachment to labels,

recalling Haider's argument from the previous chapter. "Carl's Self-Reliance?" is on what I argue to be the most significant story arc within the novel, as Carl is the only character to truly find his way out of the office environment and pursue a career he finds meaningful. I use Carl's mental breakdown and feelings of worthlessness to highlight Gorz's critique of "occupational culture" and conflating labor with morality. This leads to the introduction of Tom and the importance of Emerson in the text, which is addressed in the following section. I continue by discussing rare moments of enjoyment in the workplace and Carl's success as a landscaper, finally gaining a sense of purpose and fulfillment through labor outside of the pressures of late capitalism.

The section "The Emerson-Marx Connection" is based on an obscure reference to an article written by Marx, found by Feuer in one of Emerson's journals, and how this connection is significant as it shows Emerson in relation to Marx, a significant figure in my framework. This allows for an opening in scholarship between the two authors, which is necessary in this dissertation. I use Carl's desire for landscaping – and subsequent success – to illustrate Carl's value in his labor as it coincides with Marx's vision of reconsidering humanity's relationship with nature and technology's role in pastoral labor. There is an issue, however, with the notion of "self-reliance" as it applies to Carl: Adorno's concept of suffering, and in particular, issues inherent to identity. "Exercising reason" is impossible under late capitalism's material conditions, I argue, and Carl's success as a franchise undoubtedly took on a bureaucratic formation, reproducing some of the same issues of the workplace he departed. "'This Trauma Could Have Been an Email:' The Office and Mental Health" establishes the collective trauma narrative of Tom Mota's actions at the end of the novel, emphasizing through close reading how everyone was relieved to be alive because it meant maintaining their standards of living. I discuss the failures of HR to provide adequate psychological support in the novel, and the

deflection of trauma the workers place on each other. This transitions into the notion of forgetting, the workers' greatest fear, illuminating van der Kolk and van der Hart's discussion of Janet and narrative memory as it relates to trauma. The final section is "Tom's Epiphany: Emerson, Trauma, and the Culture Industry." All three elements intersect, and I perform a close reading of Tom's conversation with Joe while Tom is in jail. I argue that Tom has found a crack in the ideology of the culture industry of which his company is a proponent of, but his message is lost in his violent and traumatic act. Tom finally recognizes his failures to live up to the Emersonian ideals he has espoused for so long, and recognizes that Joe manifests the "Scholar" figure Tom longed to be.

As my readings demonstrate, these novels provide a basis for considering the "present" (pre-COVID) state of the office worker under a late capitalist system, reflecting the "horror of existence" back to a popular audience through a palatable medium. Utilizing a framework comprised of bureaucracy, trauma theory, late capitalism, and the culture industry, I am making a timely intervention to interrogate high levels of burnout, worker dissatisfaction, exploitative practices, and suffering mental health in the white-collar workforce. This dissertation is the result of the question modified from Naomi Mandel: "what happens when a rhetoric of trauma is applied to late capitalism?" Although "trauma" has unfortunately become a popular buzzword, my argument includes consideration of our material conditions under late capitalism to be inherently traumatic.¹³ Bureaucracy and office work are merely a small representation of labor, but the demands of work are not left at the workplace, particularly as work-from-home options

¹³ See Will Self's "A Posthumous Shock: How everything became trauma" in *Harper's Magazine*, Dec. 2021.

increase along with technological advances and the distinction between work and leisure time collapse. This project argues that these novels show readers the “real Real,” or the demands and damage done by the contemporary workplace, accumulating in slow violence, giving suffering a chance to express itself by momentarily opening a fissure in the ideology of late capitalism where real-world workers cannot.

CHAPTER II: THE PALE KING

Outline

This chapter opens with **The Initial Approach: Wallace and K.**, performing an intertextual comparison of author-avatar David Wallace's first day at the IRS exam center with Kafka's K. approaching the titular Castle. **Humanizing The Boredom Gauntlet** outlines Wallace's description of a bureaucracy as a parallel world and the (fictional) attempts to "humanize" it for consumers. This transitions into boredom as it permeates the work, moving into the discussion of the work itself in **Inputting Numbers, Outputting Decay: Trauma and Office Work**. This segment analyzes the reader-text interaction regarding boredom, and in particular the chapter on Dean stuck at his desk and contemplating suicide, all effects of late capitalism and bureaucratic pushes for "efficiency." **Bureaucratic Entities and Exploitation** returns to Wallace's reading of a bureaucracy, incorporating Graeber and structural violence. Max Weber's theories of bureaucratic structures are examined as they relate to domination and reasons for formation in Western culture, and how this relates to late capitalism and a shift into an information economy. The next section, **Variants of Violence and Alienation**, applies Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence to the text, referencing Nixon's influence Galtung for distinctions of types of violence, and how these apply is a late capitalist system to the novel's workers. **Information, Immaterial Labor, and Keeping Costs Down** identifies a shift in capitalism from goods to supervisory roles and management, along with differing sets of skills, which constitute "immaterial labor." The section finishes by discussing the role of UTEXs in minimizing costs for the IRS and the difficulties in measuring labor by information as a commodity. **Politics and Posthumanism: Becoming the Machines** begins with the Exam Center's director discussing civics and Rousseau, and Wouters' reading of the text, particularly

the conflation of humans/machines, transitioning into examining Badiou's conception of "people" against the "machine" workers at the IRS post.

Introduction

David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* explores a fascinating bureaucratic world intertwined with concerns of late capitalism, trauma, and challenges to cultural perceptions of bureaucratic work. Wallace's humanization of "cogs" in a broader apparatus offers an unusual view from inside a bureaucracy looking outwards, rather than the oft-depicted frustrating encounter from outside the system. This chapter synthesizes trauma theory, the concepts of slow violence and Empire, and theories of labor and bureaucratic work to examine Wallace's sympathetic portrayal of bureaucrats and their working conditions. It is important to note that in the case of *The Pale King*, the novel is unfinished and the material is mediated by Wallace's editor's decisions on arrangement and content, among other tweaks. As Brian McHale notes in his article "*The Pale King, Or, The White Visitation*," "Anything one ventures to say about the lost whole that *would* have been *The Pale King* will inevitably be speculative. Where does one even begin?" (emphasis McHale 191). McHale does not offer a specific solution other than looking at the pastoral introductory chapter, followed by intertextualizing it with *Gravity's Rainbow* and asserting that "the [real] world *can be read*" (emphasis McHale 192). The introductory notes by Wallace's editor admits that "there is no question that *The Pale King* would be vastly different had [Wallace] survived to finish it" (*Pale King* xiii). But this is not the only novel ever to be left unfinished and published regardless: Kafka's *The Castle*, Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*, are other prominent examples. While *The Pale King* was left unfinished, I nonetheless believe that the stand-alone nature of the sections offer enough of a view of a bureaucratic system to be worth studying. It is one of few contemporary American novels set within a bureaucracy and offers a humanizing and

sympathetic view of the “cogs” in the machine, rather than (as in Kafka’s *The Castle*) the impenetrability and frustration of encountering a bureaucracy from the outside.

While *The Pale King* occasionally strays outside of the IRS (the backstory of Tony Ware, for instance), it nonetheless keeps its core focus on the day-to-day activities of the workers. The traumas inflicted by working conditions and pressures become evident throughout the novel and, while not as gruesome as something like a mining accident, nonetheless shows the effects of late capitalism (via the notion of Empire) in an information-based economy. The trauma is not immediate; rather, it works its way into the IRS employees’ lives and increases over time, hence the need for the concept of slow violence. Hardt and Negri’s concept of Empire suggests that bureaucracies will increasingly manifest themselves across the globe, perhaps even as spontaneously, as Weber suggests, exposing more of the world to the slow violence inherent in late capitalism’s demands on the worker. Placing his novel around the time of the fictional Spackman Initiative, Wallace suggests that even as bureaucracy attempts to make itself seem more consumer-centered and personable, the underlying pressures to increase productivity and maximize profit at the expense of the employees’ health only increase along with the shift to a for-profit model of business, rather than one of civic responsibility. Wallace’s novel underscores the larger issues of trauma as related to a shifting economic focus and the evolution of late capitalism, driven by sympathetic characters and their corporeality within a bureaucratic system and consumer culture. The distinction between work and leisure time is effectively erased, anticipating the development of the “always-on” connection to the office which continues to dominate workers’ lives, developing alongside the evolution of labor under a late capitalist system.

The Initial Approach: Wallace and K.

To begin, I would like to compare the introduction of Kafka's *The Castle* with author-avatar Wallace's approach to his place of business: "It was late evening when K. arrived. The village lay under deep snow. There was no sign of the Castle hill, fog and darkness surrounded it, not even the faintest gleam of light suggested the large Castle. K. stood for a long time on the wooden bridge that leads from the main road to the village, gazing upward into the seeming emptiness" (Kafka 1). While Kafka's titular Castle induces a sense of foreboding, Wallace's approach to the Regional Exam Center is overwhelming in its maximalist detail and precision of observation, making the glimpse claustrophobic:

I also remember that I had to move and twist my own neck awkwardly in order to make out the Exam Center's various features through the impediments of the car's required signs. From this distance and set of perspectives, the REC appeared at first to be a single huge right-angled structure, with its facing tan or beige cement side mammoth and sheer, and just a bit of foreshortened side-building's roof visible past the access road, which road extended in a broad one-way curve around the main building's rear, which rear itself turned out to actually be the REC's front. (*Pale King* 277-8)

Whereas K.'s initial view of the Castle is lost in "seeming emptiness," author-avatar David Foster Wallace's initial view of the IRS facility is instead obscured by bureaucratic clutter; namely, the required stickers placed on the windshield of the AMC Gremlin, which take on a semiotic twist in the footnote ("the signs' cited reg referred to the sign itself, not to the regulation the sign was supposed to signify") (276n21). Wallace's introduction to the IRS is a convoluted mess of obscurity, traffic, regulations, and Saussurian implications. Signifiers and signifieds are tenuous at best, and Wallace repeatedly reveals the fluidity of meaning in a sequence of conflicting information and errors. In a similar vein, as Jamison argues regarding *The Castle*: "[T]he functional models against which K. judges the Castle's structure are inappropriate to its actual social function" (Jamison 101). While Wallace sees a sort of monolith, it has been apparent to readers for some time that the inner workings of the IRS – and its employees – are

far more nuanced than his impression of the building's structure. The social function of the IRS is later explained by Director DeWitt Glendenning as a complex and intricate balance between the government and citizens. The mixup of signifiers hints at the mistake and ensuing confusion of Wallace for the other David Wallace upon the author-avatar's arrival. Multiple regulatory bureaucratic processes are revealed to be erroneous, as the cited regulations and initial interpellation of Wallace by Ms. F. Chahla Neti-Neti, who is holding a sign for the other David Wallace. As revealed in §38, this is a result of an attempt to improve efficiency via a new computing system "constructed on the fly . . . [which] had to be maintained and upgraded the same way" (*Pale King* 412). As a result of the upgrades to reduce redundant employee files from the IRS records, "the two [Wallaces] became, so far as the Service's computer systems was concerned, the same person" (415). The problem is not attributed to human error; Wallace places blame purely on the computer system, rather than the fact that "that no one in the Midwest Regional Examination Center's Personnel and Training office noticed that two separate David F. Wallaces were scheduled for intake and processing at the Midwest REC over two successive days" (414). While presumably a coincidence due to the circumstances of two David F. Wallaces arriving so close together, the mistake nonetheless requires an immense amount of work to rectify, where "two different systems administrators in the Northeast and Midwest regions would eventually have to go back through a combined 2,110,000 lines of recorded code" (413). As Löwy notes regarding *The Castle*, "[i]n the fallen world, every isolated attempt – like K's – to confront lies with truth is doomed in advance," and despite his best efforts, David Wallace fails spectacularly (Löwy 83). The confusion surrounding the author-avatar's entrance into the REC, both in the subjective experience of Wallace and the objective regulations and push for efficiency, reveals the immense amount of work necessary cope with and to undo a mistake within a bureaucratic system.

Wallace's introduction to the IRS serves as a grounding point, taking readers through the process of entering the bureaucracy as an employee, and is juxtaposed with the novel's introduction to Claude Sylvanshine, an established employee (though only a GS-9) in §2. Sylvanshine's approach is via airplane, but he hesitates on the tarmac thinking about the logistics of making it to the REC, and experiencing the sublime vision of the horizon and sky at the airport, he "felt again the edge of the shadow of the wing of Total Terror and Disqualification pass over him, the knowledge of his being surely and direly ill-suited for whatever lay ahead" (*Pale King* 26). Sylvanshine's arrival is as densely complicated as Wallace's because Sylvanshine's thoughts are a sheer wall of information:

The older party next door was still trying to open her package of nuts with her teeth but had been clear on not wanting or needing help. The projected benefit obligation (PBO) equals the present value of all benefits attributed by the pension benefit formula to employee services rendered prior to that date. If you spell it fast with stress on the *h* and the *a* and then the second *a* and the *h* again then *headache* becomes a lilting children's rhymed refrain, something to jump rope with. Look down your shirt and spell *attic*. (emphasis Wallace 11)

Jumping back and forth between real-time action, CPA information, and language games, Sylvanshine's internal quantity of information processing is equal to the data taken in by Wallace's arrival. Sylvanshine is also a "fact psychic," which is described as facts "com[ing] out of nowhere, are inconvenient and discomfiting like all psychic irruptions. It's just that they're ephemeral, useless, undramatic, distracting" (120). As an example: "What Cointreau tasted like to someone with a mild head cold on the esplanade of Vienna's state opera house on 2 October 1874. How many people faced southeast to witness Guy Fawkes's hanging in 1606. The number of frames in *Breathless*" (120-1). §15 describes these thoughts as coming to Sylvanshine, who "can't help it" (122). Sylvanshine desperately tries to "filter out all sorts of psychically intuited and intrusive facts" (121). The novel is full of data processing, and Sylvanshine is the

embodiment of data processing, although for him it is useless (except for the small bits of knowledge about Garrity's ghost).

Returning to *The Castle*, Kafka establishes an important distinction between the inner and outer workings of the system K. encounters, which Wallace's arrival exemplifies even nearly a century later. Speaking with the Chairman on the confusion over his initial arrival, K. states, "I think two things must be distinguished here, first, what happens inside the offices, which can then be officially interpreted this way or that, and second, the actual person, me, who stands outside those offices and is threatened by those offices" (Kafka 65). In the exchange, the Chairman reveals that K. has not actually been in contact with the "authorities." The voices on the other end of the phone in touch with K. could have been anyone, and yet the Chairman dismisses K.'s thought that the calls were less important than in-person contact:

Those telephone answers are of "real significance," how could it be otherwise? How could the information supplied by a Castle official be meaningless, I said so already in relation to Klamm's letter. All these statements have no official meaning; if you attach official meaning to them, you're quite mistaken, though their private meaning as expressions of friendship or hostility is very great, usually greater than any official meaning could be . . . the Castle's statements shouldn't be taken literally. Still, caution is always necessary, not only here, and the more important the statement, the greater the need for caution. (72-3)

K. determines that "the only possible conclusion is that everything is very unclear and insoluble except for my being thrown out," which is immediately countered by the Chairman, who states, "Nobody is keeping you here, but that still doesn't mean you're being thrown out" (73). The only consistency is that nothing is straightforward within and tangential to the Castle. K. is given the position of janitor as a "favor," and is told by the Teacher that "if one remains conscious of one's official responsibilities one shouldn't push such favors too far" (95). This returns to the Chairman's differentiation of "official" against "private" meanings, wherein the Teacher is obliged only to the Chairman's request to employ K. out of courtesy, which speaks more

significantly about the Chairman's disposition towards K. than it does about the "official" offer of the job. In parallel, Wallace's arrival at the IRS culminates in a sexual encounter with Mrs. Neti-Neti due to mistaken identity and rank, reflecting the perceived ability to "move up" professionally by pleasing superiors *outside* the official course of duty. Mrs. Neti-Neti, as explained in §24, is given "apparent instruction" by Mrs. Van Hool (a "mid-level Personnel officer") to "extend to 'me' [the mistaken Wallace] . . . 'every courtesy,' which it emerged was a very loaded and psychologically charged term" (*Pale King* 309-10n67). While author-avatar Wallace writes this off as a product of Mrs. Neti-Neti's experiences in pre-Revolutionary Iran, where she would "'trade' or 'barter' sexual activities with high-level functionaries in order to get herself and two or three other members of her family out of Iran," their encounter under far less extreme circumstances than a revolution – a bureaucratic office – ends the same way (310). Wallace presents the encounter as a darkly comedic series of misunderstandings, but the latent content of Kafka's bureaucratic relationships underpin Wallace's experience. It is not the "official" communication that conveys how Wallace or K. are to be treated, but the implied and informal communications that have more impact on the lives of each character. So long as K. and Wallace are looked upon favorably by individual members of their respective bureaucracies, they are able to advance more so than by appealing to the "proper channels." Both authors, in addressing this particular phenomenon, show systems which appear absolutely inflexible in following sets of rules easily accommodating exceptions when made by specific people. Wallace, having assumed a much higher role upon his arrival, is forced into a situation wherein he is presumably expected to advance Mrs. Neti-Neti's career in some capacity, given the anticipated exchange-value of sex given in the footnote. K. is given his janitorial job at the request of the Chairman, so while K. is not expected to advance anyone else's position since he is starting at the bottom, K. frustrates the Teacher in that he is employed on a favor from a

superior rather than by the Teacher themselves. As I will discuss later, instances of favors and exceptions within an economic system promoting merit- or skill-based upward mobility indicate a kind of of predestination for workers, where K. is always positioned at the bottom, and Wallace – at least while the name David Wallace is misrecognized – gets an unwarranted moment closer to the top.

Humanizing The Boredom Gauntlet

Having established the introduction to the IRS, I will now consider the nature of bureaucracy as it appears in the novel. The abstract view of a bureaucratic system that Wallace offers shifts slightly as he addresses the later overhaul of the IRS in terms of an attempt at “non- or even anti-bureaucracy:” “it was a little like watching an enormous machine come to consciousness and start trying to think and feel like a real human” (*Pale King* 82). In this sense, the attempted shift of the IRS away from its bureaucratic form disrupts the concept of the central operator with its pulleys and levers and instead hints at the bureaucracy becoming a “thing,” a being, rather than a “world.” As bureaucracy attempts to disrupt its own processes, it loses status as a parallel system and instead takes on a form which, while still open to a certain extent, is implied to be far more error-prone in the attempts to “think and feel like a real human” (82). By describing the changing bureaucracy in anthropomorphizing terms, Wallace gives the bureaucracy the potential for an emotional response, the thing that is stereotypically missing from bureaucratic work. Rather than a cold, unfeeling machine, the bureaucracy adapts to its new ideology in a “convulsive” way, producing what Wallace sees as some kind of horrific mutation. As Gorz argues, “This is the crux of the problem. *The intrinsic interest of a job does not guarantee its being meaningful, just as its humanization does not guarantee the humanization of the ultimate objective it serves*” (emphasis Gorz 83). The “humanization” of the IRS does not assure its “ultimate objective” as more customer-centered and “anti-bureaucracy.” The IRS

objective is ostensibly the processing and enforcement of bureaucracy: fixed rules, policies, and procedures related to tax law. Regardless of how much the IRS attempts to be run like a for-profit business, it cannot circumvent its fundamental nature as a bureaucratic venture. Despite the (fictional) desire for change via the Spackman Initiative, the IRS' objective is incompatible with humanization, as Wallace describes in his analogy.¹⁴ The strong outward motion of kinetic energy emanating from the operator would result in flailing limbs, immense instability, and remarkable inefficiency. At its core, the IRS cannot change precisely because of the bureaucratic model it takes. To change anything about a bureaucracy, rules and regulations must be undone and redone, resulting in more departments and committees spawning to address the change and how to go about it. Any attempt to change into a more human-like form would therefore make the IRS even *more* entrenched in bureaucratic forms, ultimately working against itself.

In the novel's setting of the mid-1980's, Wallace lays the underpinnings of the IRS's anticipation of making the shift. As Wallace states in §9, the immediate question was "whether and to what extent the IRS should be operated like a for-profit business" (85). However:

Very few ordinary Americans knew anything about all this . . . the real reason why US citizens were/are not aware of these conflicts, changes, and stakes is that the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull . . . abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy. For the great disadvantage of secrecy is that it's interesting. (85)

The very nature of bureaucracy allows for concealment-via-boredom even as major changes are underway. If operated like a for-profit business, the IRS would need to place "customers first" despite all "customers" being legally obligated to deal with the IRS for tax purposes. The

¹⁴ See the 2021 Executive Order *Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government* for a "customer-first" plan in a similar vein (WH.gov).

implications here are that those on the receiving end of the IRS, endpoint consumers, will not have noticed the shift in their interactions with the IRS, perhaps immediately, or perhaps never if an audit is not performed. The concept of secrecy as being far more interesting than dullness speaks to the overall tone of the novel. Policy debates, open to public scrutiny, are described as having “hardly any coverage” in the news (86). “But not one journalist seems ever to have checked [the files] out, and with good reason: This stuff is solid rock. The eyes roll up white by the third or fourth ¶. You just have no idea” (86). §25 is devoted entirely to workers turning through sheets of paper, with minor details of workers (“Wigglers”) attempting to break up the monotony: “Joe Biron-Maint turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. David Cusk turns a page. Lane Dean Jr. rounds his lips and breathes deeply in and out like that and bends to a new file. Anand Singh closes and opens his dominant hand several times while studying a muscle in his wrist” (314). Certain chapters like §25 function to bore readers themselves through repetitive dull details of the type of bureaucratic work the characters engage in, drawing a parallel to the turning of pages and monotony of the narrative. The text is split into two columns, unlike the other sections, in an imitation of the forms being perused by the workers: “Boris Kratz bobs with a slight Hassidic motion as he crosschecks a page with a column of figures” (313). The “secrets” of the IRS are cloaked only by tedium.

Building on the aspects of tedious work, as critic Conley Wouters notes, the text is “overtly concerned with the meaning and consequences of all-pervasive boredom” (Wouters 448). Consequences are laid out in terms of maladies in §11, in the form of an inter-office memorandum concerning the “ACIRHRMSOEAPO Survey/study 1-76 — 11-77” (*Pale King* 89). The acronym is not expanded for readers; however, it can be gleaned from the superfluous title of the memorandum, “[From] Assistant Commissioner of Internal Revenue for Human Resources, Management & Support’s Office of Employee Assistance & Personnel Overview”

(89). As an “internal memorandum,” Wallace once again alludes to the “secrecy” of the IRS as little more than sheer dullness. This memorandum details the varying degrees of trauma that working at the IRS inflicts on workers as shown through a list of DSM-II classified ailments in employees having worked at least 36 months, ranging from “hypertension” to “unexplained bleeding” (the most common) and “paracatonic fugues” (89-90). These are listed “in reverse order of incidence (per medical/EAP service claim per IRSM §743/12.2(f-r))” (89). Notably, the list includes many muscle- and nervous system-related anomalies, hinting at the effects of sitting at a desk and staring at papers for years at a time. In a tragic parallel, one of the resident ghosts — Garrity — committed suicide in what later became a hallway near the wiggle room. A factory worker, Garrity pre-dated the information economy, but not advanced capitalism as a whole. Pressured for time and efficiency, Garrity’s work as a mirror inspector became tragically impossible as the demands on his mind and body increased. Preceding the IRS in the same location, the factory’s history hints at what is to come for the IRS workers. Wallace describes Garrity’s work as an absurdist exercise in overworking:

His job was to examine each one of a certain model of decorative mirror that came off the final production line, for flaws. A flaw was usually a bubble or unevenness in the mirror’s aluminum backing that caused the reflected image to distend or distort in some way . . . in essence, Garrity sat on a stool next to a slow-moving belt and moved his upper body in a complex system of squares and butterfly shapes . . . He did this three times a minute, 1,440 times per day, 365 days a year, for eighteen years. (317-18)

Wallace notes that “industrial psychology was a primitive discipline then, and there was little understanding of non-physical types of stress,” unlike the more formal evaluation undertaken in §11 (317). While the IRS workers are not staring at their own reflections, they are nonetheless intently focused on finding imperfections in the forms they are to check. This sort of concentrated bureaucratic work hides the death of Blumquist, the other ghost. An IRS employee who died from a heart attack at his desk, Blumquist was not discovered for several days,

presumed to be diligently working while at his desk. While not dead as a result of tedium or trauma, his death — and its subsequent non-discovery — nonetheless reflects the culture of the IRS in demanding constant focus on minutiae and, for Blumquist, the appearance of focus.

This is not to say, however, that intense concentration itself is always indicative of production. While specific employees have enhanced abilities, the IRS criteria for productive work allowed for loopholes in whether or not employees were actually productive. An unnamed employee — identified only by their social security number 943756788 — admits in a taped interview that employees can be intently locked in what they call the “stare,” which is a form of unproductive concentration that gives only the appearance of work. Describing it as akin to a car “stuck in the snow, turning rapidly without going forward . . . although it looks like intent concentration:”

From outside the examiner, there was no guarantee that anyone could distinguish the difference between doing the job well and being in what she called the stare, staring at the return files but not engaged by them, not truly paying attention. So long as you processed your given number of returns each day for throughput, they [management] could not be sure . . . But now, this year, they can know, they know who is doing the job . . . Because now they log your eventuated revenue instead of your throughput . . . this helps us pay attention. (*Pale King* 118-9)

The IRS, in its gradual transition to being run like a for-profit company, is now concerned with how much revenue an employee produces rather than the quantity of work the employee completes. Over the course of thousands of returns, an employee is not of value unless they can find mistakes or irregularities and forward the return to an auditor. It now becomes the luck of the draw for employees to find returns which require auditing and collections to maximize profits for the IRS, in place of meeting a quantity of returns processed. This places the examiner in a strange position: faster processing may result in more revenue given the chance of encountering a return which needs auditing, yet more methodical and attentive processing of returns may also yield subtle mistakes and details missed by faster processing. The examiner may miss mistakes

by taking on a larger volume of returns in the hopes of finding more errors but could well lose revenue through missed errors at the expense of higher throughput. Such a system indicates a flaw in the logic of management; namely, that productivity is no longer necessarily tied to skill or experience. A competent worker may end up with a pile of flawless returns and be evaluated poorly for not generating revenue. Conversely, a subpar employee may be given immensely flawed returns to process, and purely through measurement of how much money can be audited out of those flawed returns, the subpar employee outperforms their competent rival in the eyes of management. Praise and promotions become arbitrary. Rank is not necessarily dictated by merit, counter to the notion of “working your way up” which is at the core of the “American Dream” (Newman et al. 327). Although an employee states that this element of chance “helps us pay attention,” it undercuts management’s ability to discern skilled employees from fortunate employees, dispensing with the pretense of a meritocracy entirely just as the Manshardt infant is interpellated into a managerial archetype without even being employed.

To further understand the importance of skill against luck, I will now examine the role of the uncanny infant. It is the child of Mr. Manshardt, a higher-up official at the IRS post, and the narrator of the chapter finds it to function much as a manager would, raising questions of predestination: “My Audit Group’s Group Manager and his wife have an infant I can only describe as — Fierce. Its expression is fierce, its demeanor is fierce, its gaze over bottle or pacifier — fierce, intimidating, aggressive. I have never heard it cry” (*Pale King* 389). The infant replaces the intimidating, managerial gaze of a superior (though as to whether or not Mr. Manshardt acts in a similar manner is unclear). The infant is described as follows:

To complete the incongruous horror . . . [it] had placed its tiny hands folded adultly together before it on the vivid blue plastic of its play station, exactly as Mr. Manshardt or Mr. Fardelle or any of the other Group Managers or District Director’s senior staff would place their clasped hands before them on the desk to signal that you and the issue that had brought you into their office now occupied their full attention, and cleared its throat again

— for it had indeed been it, he, the infant, who, like any other GM, had cleared its throat in an expectant way . . . and, gazing at me fiercely, said — yes, said, in a high and *l*-deficient but unmistakable voice— “Well?” (395)

The narrator, horrified by this interaction, “came to see that I deferred to the infant, respected it, granted it full authority, and therefore waited . . . in the knowledge that I was, thenceforth, this tiny white frightening thing’s to command, its instrument or tool” (395). Having seen the infant perform specific tasks, such as “set[ting] aside its teething ring — rather carefully and deliberately, as a man might set aside a file on his desk once he has completed it and is ready to turn his professional attention to another,” the narrator watched what they perceive to be a performative act of management (394). It does not matter that it is an infant, or that the accoutrements are children’s toys; the movements and placements all suggest to the narrator that this infant is now in charge. Its “*l*-deficient” voice may or may not have said “well?” as our narrator may be projecting insecurities about their position but, to the employee, this infant is a surrogate for management and power structures. The infant is — albeit an infant — “like any other GM” in its clearing of the throat, a seemingly benign gesture, but to the narrator it is an indicator of power well above the narrator’s position, as if the infant is awaiting interpellation to become a GM (395). In an Althusserian framework, the infant is and always was occupying a particular position within ideology, and Wallace’s description of the infant suggests that it is conspicuously primed for management. Althusser outlines his argument with regards to Freud:

That an individual is always-already a subject, even before he is born, is nevertheless the plain reality, accessible to everyone and not a paradox at all. Freud shows that individuals are always “abstract” with respect to the subjects that they always-already are, simply by noting the ideological ritual that surrounds the expectation of a “birth” . . . it is certain in advance that it [the child] will bear its Father’s Name, and will therefore have an identity and be irreplaceable. (Althusser 132)

The Manshardt infant is uncanny, particularly given how emphatically Wallace attempts to posit the story as truthful. It is not as if the book has shied away from the uncanny — ghosts, psychic

abilities, levitation, and so on — but the poignancy of the infant as an embodiment of power structures suggests a sort of pre-determined fate for workers: some people are inherently managers, while others will have to “hope someone notices” (*Pale King* 348).

Returning to the subject of labor, I will reprise the topic of boredom. During a PR film to induct employees, interesting glimpses into the culture of the workers are exhibited, such as the interview with 951876833 who describes a “either *Twilight Zone* or *Outer Limits*” episode called “Rules and Procedures” (which is fictional). The examiners will “never forget” the “living hell” of the premise: a claustrophobic man who, due to immense fear and screaming, is by the rules of an asylum placed into a straitjacket and isolated in a minuscule room as per policy regarding screaming, as it is explained to him. The man is caught in a catch-22, permanently screaming and therefore permanently in a claustrophobic situation with no relief possible. These sorts of interviews offset Hindle’s longwinded description of the Spackman initiative with more entertaining fare for readers, just as certain sections of the books provide relief from sections such as §25 (“Turns a page”). In Ralph Clare’s article, “The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*,” Clare argues regarding §25 that “just as the reader’s possible boredom is turned into surprise here, so too does the possibility arise for the novel’s characters in this section and elsewhere, laboring as they are at their dull, purgatorial jobs, to perceive ‘devils as angels.’ Once again, the mechanism that metamorphosizes one into the other remains shrouded in mystery and tinged with mysticism” (Clare 442-3). As an example, §25 includes the occasional line between workers’ activities such as “every love story is a ghost story” and “devils are actually angels” (*Pale King* 314). These sentences, according to Clare, “reward the attentive reader. Skim through this section’s pages, as some readers may be wont to do, and you will miss these two seeming non-sequiturs” (Clare 443). The juxtaposition of monotonous sequences and dense jargon against the more narrative sections is not as clear-cut

as it seems, instead embedding moments of clarity — however esoteric they might be — into otherwise dull sequences which both readers and characters must endure.

Inputting Numbers, Outputting Decay: Trauma and Office Work

Coinciding with the issue of boredom are its effects, which I will discuss through the lens of trauma theory and the narrative effects Wallace employs. Trauma theory has shifted its focus from the Freudian concepts of the “unspeakable” and “return” to the site of trauma to neo-Lacanian readings (and interdisciplinary studies) which question the seeming authority of “silence” within the field (Stampfl 19). Where influential critics such as Caruth have leaned on Freudian interpretations of trauma, dating back to the First World War, more contemporary approaches move “toward a focus on the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience” (Balaev 3). The field of trauma theory is expanding to encompass newer representations of trauma, particularly in terms of cultural mediation, and a lack of “silence” — as in the Freudian model — regarding the particulars of trauma suffered. As Laurie Vickroy argues:

Contemporary fiction depicts the struggle with memory and avoidance that characters undergo, but these representations move beyond the repetitive-performative image found in the classic model of trauma to accommodate the ambiguous aspects of traumatic experience that include limited remembering in contrast to a fixed state of forgetting . . . By seeing trauma as collectively and situationally-driven, the possibilities for telling increase. (Vickroy 140)

Vickroy’s description of trauma’s appearance in contemporary fiction fits neatly with Wallace’s approach to demonstrating the effects of bureaucracy on its workers. Trauma theory has evolved past the classical Freudian model in Wallace’s novel, as it is situationally-driven at the IRS. Certain characters, such as Tony Ware, are exceptions, having experienced trauma outside of bureaucracies, but the point remains that bureaucratic work inflicts its own form of trauma. Dean is completely isolated by the nature of his work even one month into it — work which is

collectively experienced but individually suffered. In §44, an unidentified speaker (a cart boy) states that “the underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human . . . if you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish” (*Pale King* 440). For Dean, this is clearly not the case. An environment that “precludes everything vital and human” aptly describes a bureaucratic structure in the sense that an artificial construct devoted to “maximum efficiency” — and subsequent bloating — is as dehumanizing as possible (440). Dean does not involuntarily return to the site of trauma, as in the Freudian model, but instead willingly suffers for his paycheck while being robbed of his sense of fantasy.

Vickroy also alludes to the influence of fictional trauma on the reader; in this case, that of Dean’s frustratingly slow and agonizing chapter: “Authors who want to adapt readers’ cognitive frameworks towards victims must signal for readers the effects of trauma on characters by engaging readers’ cognitive and emotional responses in their depictions. Thus writers can affect the ways readers usually attribute mental states to characters” (Vickroy 138). While the ultimate example is the aforementioned §25, §33, which focuses on an individual’s experience, rather than the collective actions of the room, allows readers to analyze “cognitive and emotional responses” (138). Dean is internally distracted: “Try as he might he could not this last week help envisioning the inward lives of the older men to either side of him, doing this day after day. Getting up on a Monday and chewing their toast and putting their hats and coats on knowing what they were going out the door to come back to for eight hours” (*Pale King* 379). Dean’s thoughts stray into IRS paperwork via numbers, compounding the subject of work in his head:

He did another return, again the math squared and there were no itemizations on 34A and the printout’s numbers for W-2 and 1099 and Forms 2440 and 2441 appeared to square and he filled out his codes for the middle tray’s 402 and signed his name and ID number that some part of him still refused to quite get memorized so he had to unclip his badge and check it each time and then stapled the 402 to the return and put the file in the top

tier's rightmost tray for 402s Out and refused to let himself count the number in the trays yet, and then unbidden came the thought that *boring* also meant something that drilled in and made a hole. (emphasis Wallace 379-80)

The run-on sentence serves to counteract the fact that very little time passes, and that “[c]locks on Tingles were not allowed” (379). There is one clock in the room and “The rule was, the more you looked at the clock the slower the time went” (379). For Dean, this time spent is excruciatingly slow, as emphasized in the last sentence of the chapter, “He let himself look up and saw that no time had passed at all, again” (387). Dean begins to speculate on the clock’s inner life:

He imagined that the clock’s second hand possessed awareness and knew that it was a second hand and that its job was to go around and around inside a circle of numbers forever at the same slow unvarying machinelike rate, going no place it hadn’t already been a million times before, and imagining the second hand was so awful it made his breath catch in his throat. (383-4)

Dean’s experience is analogous to the second hand’s imagined awareness, with his work being perpetual, repetitive, and mindless. Having a clock, which is already a machine, described as “machinelike” in Dean’s imagination further emphasizes his inability to escape from the mentality of work. Machinery hearkens back to the industrial-era purpose of the building which produced Garrity’s ghost, drawing parallels between the information economy and the industrial economy which preceded it. The clock serves as a physical reminder of the past, both in the sense that it is mechanical, and that its incessant forward movement counts off the time that Dean has spent at his desk attempting to perform his task. Checking returns mirrors the perpetual retreading of territory that the personified clock hand engages in. Notably, the minute and hour hands are left out of Dean’s imagined life of the second hand, suggesting that Dean’s experience of time is on such a micro-level that the “slow unvarying” passage of seconds are felt exponentially larger as the measurements of time increase. As the last sentence of the chapter indicates, however, Dean is stuck in a temporal dead zone with only his thoughts about work

providing a forward momentum for the narration, but not the actual passage of time. Dean, a new hire, was not included in §11's survey but it is clear that his mental state is deteriorating quickly.

The run-on sentences, full of maximalist detail, emulate the frustration and sense of time that Dean subjectively feels, allowing readers to insert themselves into Dean's position and empathize with his experience. Narrowing the focus to just Dean, rather than the full room of §25, where we get a few snippets of what Dean is physically doing: "Lane Dean Jr. turns a page . . . Lane Dean Jr. traces his jaw's outline with his ring finger . . . Lane Dean Jr. rounds his lips and breathes deeply in and out like that and bends to a new file . . . Lane Dean Jr. turns a page" (312-5). There is no active sense of community here — no verbal or interactive support — as the workers silently grind through their returns and files. Perhaps there exists a community, passively speaking, in shared knowledge of work; however, it is unknown to what extent other workers are experiencing the same type of boredom that Dean feels, and the loss of fantasy that Dean experiences. It does not appear that Dean's situation is to be used as a synecdoche in relation to the other Wigglers, particularly as he is a relatively new hire and was not included in the inter-office memorandum relaying the survey details of health issues plaguing workers. While suicide is not listed on the memorandum, it is clear that the work is causing ideation in Dean, explicitly stated by the narrative voice. The appearance of Blumquist's ghost serves as a reminder of Dean's eventual fate — death — and implies that he could live out the rest of his life at the desk and become trapped in the office, even after dying. Dean is merely at the bottom of the bureaucratic structure, and much like Blumquist, could end up a lifetime and afterlife-time employee at the same rank.

The insidiousness of the transformation into a bureaucratic employee is exemplified by §33, detailing Lane Dean Jr.'s boredom at work. "This was boredom beyond any boredom he'd

ever felt. This made the routing desk at UPS look like a day at Six Flags” (379). He engages in a fantasy as directed by the IRS:

[He] flexed his buttocks and held to a count of ten and imagined a warm pretty beach with mellow surf as instructed in orientation the previous month . . . after just an hour the beach was a winter beach, cold and gray and the dead kelp like the hair of the drowned, and it stayed that way despite all attempts. (378)

The beach eventually becomes “solid cement instead of sand and the water was gray and barely moved, just quivered a little, like Jell-O that’s almost set. Unbidden came ways to kill himself with Jell-O” (382). Wallace throws in the stinger: “never before in his life up to now had [Lane Dean Jr.] once thought of suicide” (380). The tedium of processing returns and other forms endlessly has brought this employee to consider ending his life, much as Garrity hung himself just a short distance away in “what was now the north hallway off the REC Annex’s wiggle room” (318). When Lane Dean Jr. switches to imagining his son’s face, a better source of relief, it nonetheless starts “melting and lengthening and growing a long cleft jaw and the face aging years in just seconds and finally caving in from old age and falling away from the grinning yellow skull underneath” (384). Lane Dean Jr.’s foray into suicidal ideation and his fantasy being co-opted by his boredom show the insidiousness of collective trauma and slow violence. He notices teethmarks in the blotter, indicating that another employee had resorted to bizarre behavior in a futile attempt to overcome boredom. Somewhat appropriately, the ghost of Blumquist appears and — perhaps hallucinated, perhaps in reality — says to Dean that “you’re getting a taste,” subtly alluding to the blotter’s teethmarks and the frustration that Dean is feeling (384). Dean’s increasing death-wish takes place instantaneously, as he looks up at the clock and “saw that no time had passed at all, again” (387). He is doomed to worry about time, even on his break, when he would “sit facing the wall clock in the lounge . . . counting the seconds tick off until he had to come back and do this again” (381). With Dean’s fantasies (the beach, then his

son) heavily distorted, he is robbed of his one coping mechanism for Wiggly work. Unable to leave the room except on breaks, which are even then dictated by staring at the clock, Dean is trapped without even psychological escape from his boredom. Even as he might return home, the power of the culture industry does not permit leisure time to serve as a distraction from the structure of late capitalism:

The power of industrial society is imprinted on people once and for all. The products of the culture industry are such that they can be alertly consumed even in a state of distraction. But each one is a model of the gigantic economic machinery, which, from the first, keeps everyone on their toes, both at work and in the leisure time which resembles it. (Horkheimer and Adorno 100)

While not an active consumer of media during his breaks, the point nonetheless stands that Dean's free time is structured by work responsibilities and anxiety over returning to work. None of Dean's time is truly free. His cultural context demands constant attention to labor and as a result Dean has come to fear his breaks as they only serve as reminders that he must inevitably return to his desk. Slow violence and trauma are in effect: in the Lacanian sense, Dean's increasing loss of fantasy will damage his subject as access to his *objet petit a* diminishes. Much like Josephine in *The Beautiful Bureaucrat*, Dean's identity will become corrupted without access to fantasy, the method of structuring his reality in relation to desire and the Other. Dean's trauma is a dissolution of self and purpose as his creative faculties are destroyed by late capitalist labor.

Having established the effects of labor on Dean in particular, I will now turn to a broader discussion of productivity. Trauma, as detailed in §11, is pervasive throughout the IRS.

Bureaucracy is intrinsically tied up with political and economic systems of domination, and capitalism in particular. The IRS workers are a form of capital and are subjected to insidious forms of trauma, whether they are actively aware of it or not. While there is no explicit pressure in the novel to process forms quickly, bureaucracies have long been under an "efficiency

movement” or “Taylorism” — a “scientific” methodology of improving productivity in industry — which as previously mentioned contributed to Garrity’s death. The irony of this methodology is that it spawned bureaucracies to study and enforce application, creating the very sort of system that society perceives as bloated and slow to operate. But as Taylor insists in *The Principles of Scientific Management*:

It is only through *enforced* standardization of methods, *enforced* adaptation of the best implements and working conditions, and the *enforced* cooperation that this faster work can be assured. And the duty of enforcing the adoption of standards and of enforcing this cooperation rests with the *management* alone. (emphasis Taylor 83)

The employees cannot self-regulate. There needs to exist a power structure which can enforce faster results, with the threat of punishment for falling behind. Time and motion studies are ideal for bureaucracies, in the sense that they get the most done at the fastest pace, hence Graeber’s argument for capitalism’s reductionary methods (i.e. sectioned forms) as one end of bureaucratic experience. This process of streamlining, however, requires human labor to increase its speed which puts tremendous stress on the workers, and as demonstrated explicitly by Garrity’s death, and more generally in the fact that burnout, high turnover, and even injury/death are accepted as an inevitable part of the time and motion “improvements.”

Bureaucratic Entities and Exploitation

To further understand the role of bureaucracy in the novel, I will now examine Wallace’s analogy of a parallel bureaucratic world and causation. §10 of *The Pale King* gives an abstract but useful view of bureaucracy, from the author’s reflection on the outcome of *Atkinson et al. v. The United States* (“government bureaucracy as ‘the only known parasite larger than the organism on which it subsists’”), which is worth citing in near-entirety:

The truth is such a bureaucracy is really much more of a parallel world, both connected to and independent of this one, operating under its own physics and imperatives of cause. One might envision a large and intricately branching system of jointed rods, pulleys, gears, and levers radiating out from a central operator such that tiny movements of that

operator's finger are transmitted through that system to become the gross kinetic charges in the rods at the periphery. It is at this periphery that the bureaucracy's world acts upon this one.

The crucial part of the analogy is that the elaborate system's operator is not himself uncaused. The bureaucracy is not a closed system; it is this that makes it a world instead of a thing. (*Pale King* 88)

In conceiving of a bureaucracy as having a multiplied effect on both its own world and the parallel real world, Wallace conceives the bureaucracy as an "impossible" system to deal with; because the periphery exerts the most force as it radiates out from smaller delicate operations at the center. The "crucial part of the analogy" speaks to the desire of maintaining maximum efficiency from minimal effort. This mechanism, however, requires resources, both human and otherwise, to operate. As Graeber states in his definition of "The Iron Law of Liberalism:"

[A]ny market reform, any government initiative intended to reduce red tape and promote market forces will have the ultimate effect of increasing the total number of regulations, the total amount of paperwork, and the total number of bureaucrats the government employs. (Graeber 9)

In the pursuit of "efficiency," according to Graeber, the system must become inherently more *inefficient* and bloated.

Wallace's reading of a bureaucracy, positing the central figure of the analogy as a "caused" entity, evokes the question of what caused the bureaucracy's center to exist in the first place, and the potential for violence via the increased effects of the operator further out in the bureaucratic world. As a parallel world, it may perhaps reflect Weber's concept of "democratization" wherein the formation of political parties needing to elect a leader inevitably fell back on bureaucratic structures. Rule is not so much "by the people" but by an elite few elected to represent "the people." A bureaucracy-as-world, then, radiates power from a centralized core, as Wallace describes, in parallel with the Western model of politics discussed by Weber. The operator is not a single person; rather, the operator is in the hands of a deeper system — capitalism itself — which can and does inflict violence. Yet power only rests with the

operator provided that there are many others to carry out requests and enforce the bureaucracy. Graeber argues for a conception of “structural violence” being imposed by bureaucracy, wherein “systematic inequalities [are] ultimately backed up by the threat of force” (Graeber 69). Structural violence would occur at the periphery of Wallace’s parallel worlds, where the “bureaucracy’s world acts upon this one” (*Pale King* 88). The kinetic energy at the outer boundaries of the bureaucratic world show the effects of the operator as far more intense than within a bureaucracy, potentiating an intersection of structural violence. Structural violence, as caused by bureaucracy, occurs when rules are put into place and the outcome has the potential to be violent (i.e. the force applied by the police). While not necessarily being used against a criminal, the potential use of force is nonetheless backed by the threat of physical violence to enforce rules. This involves police procedures and paperwork, and as Graeber argues, “police are bureaucrats with weapons” (Graeber 73). A bureaucracy, then, is only as effective as its ability to carry out action, making the abstract bureaucratic processes and information into a tangible physical force. “The police truncheon is precisely the point where the state’s bureaucratic imperative for imposing simple administrative schema and its monopoly on coercive force come together” (80). To give a relevant example for *The Pale King*, if someone is convicted of tax fraud, they are potentially subject to violence at the hands of the police. The IRS is effective in the sense that it can enforce its rules through a state apparatus and the threat of violence if need be. Somatic and latent violence from the police truncheon can become manifest when necessary. Latent violence is understood to be the motivating force that causes people to submit to bureaucratic structures, lest it become manifest. The periphery of the parallel worlds is a space of structural violence, where the bureaucracy’s rules are enforced in the real world, originating in the rules put in place by the system operator. The paperwork of rules and its effects are amplified as a rule violation moves through systems of bureaucrats towards the periphery, ultimately

ending in structural violence from one parallel world to the other. Internally, however, the IRS inflicts slow violence on its workers.

It is important at this point to consider Max Weber's *Economy and Society* as it outlines a basis for 20th century thought on bureaucratic structures, particularly as Weber discusses the importance of files and low-level workers, much like we see with Dean. Weber outlines "Characteristics of Modern Bureaucracy" including the following:

The management of the modern office is based upon written documents (the "files") which are preserved in their original or draft form, and upon a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts. The body of officials working in an agency along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the files make up a *bureau*. (emphasis Weber, *Economy and Society* 957)

Weber notes that positions are fillable by anyone, due to the existing structure of the bureaucracy:

When the principle of jurisdictional "competency" is fully carried through, hierarchical subordination — at least in public office — does not mean that the "higher" authority is authorized simply to take over the business of the "lower." Indeed, the opposite is the rule; once an office has been set up, a new incumbent will always be appointed if a vacancy occurs. (*Economy and Society* 957)

Workers on either level are easily replaceable, due to the "democratization" of society.

"Bureaucracy is *the* means of transforming social action into rationally organized action.

Therefore, as an instrument of rationally organizing authority relations, bureaucracy was and is a power instrument of the first order for one who controls the bureaucratic apparatus" (emphasis *Economy and Society* 987). It is seemingly inevitable that power structures naturally align themselves into bureaucratic structures in order to carry out objectives. This can partially be traced to the functioning of political parties:

We are primarily interested in "domination" insofar as it is combined with "administration." Every domination both expresses itself and functions through administration. Every administration, on the other hand, needs domination, because it is always necessary that some powers of command be in the hands of somebody. (*Economy and Society* 948)

In terms of politics, Weber's argument points to "democratization" wherein the formation of political parties needing to elect a leader inevitably fall back on bureaucratic structures. There emerges a leader, holder of "powers of command," to preside over the bureaucratic structure of the party. The government (for example, in the US) is a bureaucratic structure following the party structure. Weber further argues that it is easiest for the wealthy to assume positions of power because "they can afford to take the time to carry on the administrative functions cheaply or without any pay and as part time jobs" (*Economy and Society* 949). Thus capitalism has its fingers in bureaucratic structures, with the wealthy assuming the powers of command over the workers who do not have the time or ability to lose a source of income; it is not the most experienced or knowledgeable person who can become a leader, but the wealthiest.

"Democratization" has enabled a culture of bureaucracy to persist and become one of the dominant modes of labor in Western economies. There is a tension between how we see "democracy" as a political process from Weber's definition of "democratization;" namely, that it is used in the sense of being "based on the assumption that everybody is equally qualified to conduct the public affairs" and "the scope of power of command is kept at a minimum" (*Economy and Society* 948). While in principle this is an idealized democracy, "democracy" as we think of today has evolved, particularly in the United States, as a system where the "scope of power of command" has greatly increased under a bureaucratic system. Rule is not so much "by the people" but by an elite elected to represent "the people." In terms of *The Pale King*, §28 notes that political appointments are necessary for "DRECs or DRSCs or Regional Commissioners . . . and the best the District Director can do is to make their District's output look really good and hope someone notices" (*Pale King* 348). Wallace outlines the "10 Laws of

IRS Personnel,” which more or less consist of the desire for employees to move up in pay grade (directly tied to position title).

Weber notes that bureaucracy organically starts as soon as there is a power structure established, and that it is near impossible to end. Dehumanization is key to development:

When fully developed, bureaucracy also stands, in a specific sense, under the principle of *sine ira ac studio*. Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is “dehumanized,” the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation. This is appraised as its special virtue by capitalism. (*Economy and Society* 975)

Dehumanization promotes a successful bureaucratic structure, and as we have seen in Wallace’s novel, the platitudes of the beach scene are offered as a remedy to the nature of the work. Weber argues the inescapability of bureaucratic structuring:

The individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of the apparatus into which he has been harnessed . . . the professional bureaucrat is chained to his activity in his entire economic and ideological existence. In the great majority of cases he is only a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march. The official is entrusted with specialized tasks, and normally the mechanism cannot be put into motion or arrested by him, but only from the very top. (987-8)

The employees in Wallace’s novel, however, are humanized to the maximum possible extent.

Dean’s fantasies about his family life are slowly destroyed by the bureaucratic grind and excruciating boredom. While he is a “cog” in a sense of being part of the mechanism of bureaucracy at work as an examiner, Dean is at the same time not a “cog” in the colloquial sense of a bureaucratic system, possessing human desires and behaviors outside of merely existing as a function within the IRS. Wallace provides numerous backstories (Tony Ware, David Cusk, David Wallace, Leonard Stecyk, and so on) to humanize the employees of the IRS. Whether or not this humanization is seen on the public end of the IRS is unknown. Presumably, collections agents and other departments handle the public end of the IRS forcing a particular public perception of the apparatus. By giving readers these backstories and insight into the minds of

characters, he dispels the traditional notion of the bureaucracy (in this case, the IRS) as a faceless unfeeling entity. Rules and regulations are, of course, in place and it is part of the workers' jobs to enforce and follow them, but it is the unique quality of insight into characterization that Wallace gives which counters the more stereotypical consumer-end experience of the bureaucracy. Where Kafka's K. is repeatedly shunted by a bureaucracy, Wallace's characters inhabit the inner workings of one, and sympathy for the workers is generated through their frustration and misery. Continuing his discussion of bureaucratic structuring, Weber calls attention to the subjects of a bureaucratic system:

The ruled, for their part, cannot dispense with or replace the bureaucratic apparatus once it exists, for it rests upon expert training, a functional specialization of work, and an attitude set on habitual virtuosity in the mastery of single yet methodically integrated functions . . . Increasingly, the material fate of the masses depends upon the continuous and correct functioning of the ever more bureaucratic organizations of private capitalism, and the idea of eliminating them becomes more and more utopian. (978)

The IRS, then, sustains the economic structure of the government, and as a product of capitalism it upholds the existing cultural structure as well due to its entrenchment in culture and highly specialized type of labor. Immaterial labor at the IRS is ultimately at the whim of capitalism, rather than governmental work. The point of the IRS is to generate revenue *for* the government, and as such it fits into the ideological framework of capitalism promoted by the institution it serves. As an institution dedicated to the bureaucracy of capitalism the IRS appears as a part of the state apparatus, but the state itself is a function of global capitalism. As E. Mandel cites Kautsky: "the capitalist class rules, but it does not govern. It is content to give orders to the government" (qtd. in E. Mandel 479). From the top down, global capitalism as it has evolved creates a bureaucratic meta-structure over the more organic and spontaneous eruptions of bureaucracy that Weber describes. Existing structures of politics are subsumed by global capitalism and the IRS, as a bureaucratic structure under the state apparatus, is therefore

governed by the state, which is in turn ordered by global capitalism. It is only natural for the IRS to make the shift towards the for-profit model of business as described by Wallace via the Spackman Initiative to maximize profits while exploiting its employees to the fullest. This exploitation, however, is more abstract as the capitalist economy shifts from industrialism to informatics.

Variants of Violence and Alienation

Building on the concept of trauma, in this section I examine types of violence which inflict trauma. IRS work invokes what Rob Nixon refers to as “slow violence,” which is “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). We are accustomed to thinking of violence in terms of a spectacle; however, the bureaucrat is doing drudging work without immediate risk, hence the need for the concept of “slow violence,” or “calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans — and outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media” (Nixon 6). To clarify: the violence that occurs within a bureaucracy, to the bureaucrats, is the set of working conditions that late capitalism demands, which are determined by the need to increase productivity *at any cost*. The killing floors of Sinclair have been replaced by the IRS of Wallace, animal carcasses by paperwork, and a mechanized speed-up by late nights at the office to satisfy the higher-ups. Nixon draws a distinction between “slow violence” and “structural violence,” but admits that structural violence can be a component of slow violence:

We can recognize that the structural violence embodied by a neoliberal order of austerity measures, structural adjustment, rampant deregulation, corporate megamergers, and a widening gulf between rich and poor is a form of covert violence in its own right that is often a catalyst for more recognizably overt violence . . . In contrast to the static connotations of structural violence, I have sought, through the notion of slow violence, to foreground questions of time, movement, and change, however gradual . . . To talk about slow violence, then, is to engage directly with our contemporary politics of speed.

Simply put, structural violence is a theory that entails rethinking different notions of causation and agency with respect to violent effects. Slow violence, by contrast, might well include forms of structural violence, but has a wider descriptive range in calling attention . . . [to] more complex descriptive categories of violence enacted slowly over time. (Nixon 10-11)

It is the emphasis on time and the “contemporary politics of speed” that applies to the bureaucracy. Certainly, structural violence is enacted in the sense of “causation and agency” of a system of violence not typically thought of as “violent” in the sense of immediate physical injury; however, my interests lie in the temporal aspects of bureaucratic work and the degradation of workers over time, or the long-term effects of working within a bureaucratic system. Johan Galtung, from whom Nixon draws the distinction between structural and slow violence from, argues that violence is:

present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations . . . violence here is defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is. (emphasis Galtung 168)

He gives the example of tuberculosis in the eighteenth century versus contemporary medicine, and states that “it would be hard to conceive of this as violence [in the 18th century] since it might have been quite unavoidable, but if he dies from it today, despite all the medical resources in the world, then violence is present according to our definition” (168). Galtung distinguishes between biological violence which “reduces somatic capability,” physical violence, “which increases the constraint on human movements,” and psychological violence, which “would include lies, brainwashing, indoctrination of various kinds, threats, etc. that serve to decrease mental potentialities” (169). Bureaucracy, as I will later discuss, incurs both forms of violence, though not necessarily in an immediate form. The workers at the IRS are primarily under psychological violence, though as §11 shows, biological/somatic violence is also part of the trauma suffered by bureaucrats — again, not immediate, but over a period of time.

Another viewpoint on violence comes from Galtung, who also discusses the concept of intended versus unintended violence which is applicable to what readers observe at the IRS post. At no point in time is it suggested that the violence occurring is intentional; rather, it is simply in the nature of the system to cause harm without any one particular agent inflicting it. Galtung differentiates based on several factors:

[W]hen *guilt* is to be decided, since the concept of guilt has been tied more to *intention*, both in Judaeo-Christian ethics and in Roman jurisprudence, than to *consequence* (whereas the present definition of violence is entirely located on the consequence side). (emphasis Galtung 171-2)

Drawing from a Freudian concept, Galtung discusses manifest and latent violence, differentiated by manifest being “observable; although not directly since the theoretical entity of ‘potential realization ’also enters the picture. Latent violence is something which is not there, yet might easily come about” (172). In Wallace’s novel, the latent violence of late capitalism becomes manifest, though it is not immediately apparent; hence the need for the notion of slow violence.

Slow violence occurs as the bureaucrats spend their lives at work, which as previously mentioned works its way from the office and into the daily lives of the workers. Trauma (as §11 details scientifically) is inflicted upon the workers in the form of slow violence, where the longer the worker remains at the post, the more likely they are to suffer from ailments. The root cause of these ailments, I argue, is the elephant in the room: capitalism itself. It is not, of course, immediately apparent: as §11 notes, the afflictions are studied only in workers who are there in excess of three years, and only within the IRS. Bureaucracy, as an ever-more “efficient” system produced under capitalism, links to the notion of collective trauma, which as Kai Erikson notes, “works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it . . . but it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared” (*Everything*

in Its Path 153-4). Weber argued over a century ago that as capitalism expands the end result will be “inescapable universal bureaucratization” (*Political Writings* 279). While *The Pale King* is not as good of an example as Phillips *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* of a truly universal system, *The Pale King* nonetheless exemplifies certain traits of a vast bureaucratic system that is violent towards its workers.

Coupled with this violence is a strong sense of alienation, particularly in the form of government rankings and social security numbers unique to IRS employees, as they begin with the number nine. Employee rank, via the General Schedule payscale, forms the hierarchy of the IRS along with explicit identification of employees by grade and number: “Julia Drutt Chaney, forty-four, GS-10, 952678315, Administrative Supervisor for 047B across the complex” (*Pale King* 359). This identification occurs in a phone conversation between Sylvanshine and Reynolds Jensen Jr., who also refer to “907313433, a full CPA, Sheehan . . . a GS-13, nine years in” (358). The employee identification is consistently tied to the rote numeral identifiers, and again, “Rosebury, Eugene E., forty, GS-13, 907313433” (360). Wallace accidentally gives the same social security number for two different employees, but it does not particularly matter — the insistence of identification by number and rank is pervasive. Only after the numerical values are we given insight to what Eugene Rosebury might be like: “Sandy hair, tall, a little stooped, glasses don’t quite fit or else his ears aren’t symmetrical, looks somehow scholarly but that might be the pipe, smokes a pipe” (360). By abstracting the individual into number and rank, the IRS effectively erases the individual’s sense of self, and subsequently community, in the sense that the employees are cut off from the outside world. As author-avatar Wallace notes, “The only US citizens anywhere whose Social Security numbers start with the numeral 9 are those who are, or at some time were, contract employees of the Internal Revenue Service . . . It’s like you’re

born again, ID-wise” (68). Workers are transformed, permanently marked, by numbers within the bureaucratic structure in which they exist.

Information, Immaterial Labor, and Keeping Costs Down

To further understand the role of the information economy in late capitalism, I will now discuss immaterial labor in this section. Bureaucracies affect the endpoint physical labor of factories, for example, by regulating and monitoring the “real” work of a company, resulting in a tangible product or informatics. An information-based economy, without traditional goods (i.e. a physical product created by human labor) demands reification of an already abstract commodity (information/knowledge). The endpoint consumers are other corporations, or perhaps even the same corporation — or in the case of *The Pale King*, the government — and no tangible product changes hands. The trauma of this system comes from the pressure to process information at a rapid rate under global empire. The bureaucrat, though they do not necessarily realize it themselves, has trauma inflicted by a global capitalist system of information exchange, which comes about from what prefaces the book: Frank Bidart reflecting on “[filling] pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed” (Bidart 11). The reciprocal nature of IRS paperwork affects the employees as much as they affect the forms they’re filling out or checking, and as a result, instances of trauma accumulate. Nick Heffernan, in reviewing Ernest Mandel’s “history of the capitalist mode of production,” identifies the fourth stage as “the period from 1940/45 to the present, based on innovations in micro-electronics and information processing, cybernetics, automation and nuclear energy” (Heffernan 18). Information processing is at the forefront of the IRS ’work, accumulating data on a national scale to process tax returns, but also for the purposes of maintaining as much of a bureaucratic structure as possible, which is necessary for the IRS to continue existing. Without information processing the IRS would be redundant, so it must self-preserve by carrying out the law via the accumulation of data, creating

a financial profile of its endpoint consumers. As demands from an increasing volume of consumers (i.e. population increase) are met, so must the IRS become larger to handle the influx of data.

Ernest Mandel, in his book *Late Capitalism*, outlines what he refers to as the “third technological revolution” in capitalism, wherein (among other things), there is a “shift of living labour power still engaged in the process of production from the actual treatment of raw materials to preparatory or supervisory functions” (Mandel 195). The IRS workers are no longer in an industrial society producing physical end-products; instead, they verify and produce information. In this sense, they have advanced to a supervisory function wherein the workers exist to check existing data (tax return forms) and process them, effectively becoming the post-industrial process of production themselves, by supervising data. The only computer system explicitly mentioned in the novel is the employee database, which results in the mix-up of the two David Wallaces as discussed above. The labor carried out by the IRS workers, as depicted, does not rely on computer data entry and instead requires intense mental effort to verify returns rather than using an automated process. The human labor becomes increasingly machinelike, hearkening back to Garity’s rapid assembly line inspections. The technology available cannot perform the job, so it is left to the human workers to labor at a machine’s pace to stay productive and competitive. Considering the evolution of labor tasks from Garity to Dean, it is important to examine the changing expectations of employees. As Maurizio Lazzarato argues regarding the shift in labor from industrial to informatics:

All the characteristics of the postindustrial economy (both in industry and society as a whole) are highly present within the classic forms of “immaterial” production: audiovisual production, advertising, fashion, the production of software, photography, cultural activities, and so forth. The activities of this kind of immaterial labor force us to question the classic definitions of *work* and *workforce*, because they combine the results of various different types of work skill: intellectual skills, as regards to the cultural-informational content; manual skills for the ability to combine creativity, imagination,

and technical and manual labor; and entrepreneurial skills in the management of social relations and the structuring of that social cooperation of which they are a part. (emphasis Lazzarato 136)

While Lazzarato does not specifically mention bureaucratic work, the point nonetheless remains that immaterial labor alters the notion of “work” per se, moving from a tangible product to something more abstract and complex than a physical finished product. “Intellectual skills” are utilized by the IRS workers in processing forms, “manual skills” in calculation (albeit with creativity and imagination stifled by the nature of the work), and “entrepreneurial skills” in the sense of being part of an institution which regulates a significant segment of public activity.

Regarding the production of immaterial labor, Lazzarato posits:

Because the capitalist entrepreneur does not produce the forms and contents of immaterial labor, he or she does not even produce innovation. For economics there remains only the possibility of managing and regulating the activity of immaterial labor and creating some devices for the control and creation of the public/consumer by means of the control of communication and information technologies and their organizational processes. (145)

The IRS and bureaucratic structure tightly regulate the “control of communication and information technologies and their organizational processes” through highly structured systems, such as the pay scale and grade of public servants, the isolation of each department from every other, and the changing of social security numbers, to give a few examples (145). The output of immaterial labor for the IRS is pure information regarding taxpayers and their finances, as enforced by the threat of violence.

Hardt and Negri offer a more streamlined definition of immaterial labor, breaking it down into three distinct segments rather than Lazzarato’s more holistic approach. Bureaucratic work fits into Hardt and Negri’s second form of immaterial labor, which consists of “analytical and symbolic tasks, which itself breaks down into creative and intelligent manipulation on the one hand and routine symbolic tasks on the other” (Hardt and Negri 293). Most importantly,

“cooperation is completely immanent to the laboring activity itself” (emphasis Hardt and Negri 294). All parts of the IRS bureaucracy must function simultaneously, from the Wigglers to the Cart Boys, UTEXs and upper management, as the only way for the labor to be completed. The “central operator,” as the aforementioned “parallel world” describes, is not “uncaused” (*Pale King* 88). Instead, the broader mechanisms of global capitalism and network production orchestrate the bureaucratic performance: “The tendency toward the deterritorialization of production is even more pronounced in the processes of immaterial labor that involve the manipulation of knowledge and information” (Hardt and Negri 295). Wallace sets the novel in the middle of a transitional period, both between how it operates publicly (lurching towards the for-profit model) and how it operates internally, with the forms still being processed by hand by the Wigglers. Wallace’s timeframe is before the vast computing networks and automatized processes worked their way into information processing at the IRS, instead relying on the immaterial labor of the employees rather than purely electronic automation. The shift towards workers-as-supervisors over automation is in progress, the process is not complete at the time the novel is set. For now, the immaterial labor is analytical tasks, seemingly endless.

The concept of immaterial labor, “more defined by cultural, informational, or knowledge components,” plays out in that at the IRS “the labor is increasingly difficult to quantify in capitalist schemata of valorization: in other words, labor time is more difficult to measure and less distinct from time outside of work” (Virno and Hardt 261). The mental capacity of the examiners is what is prized, rather than physicality and the production of a material object. Information processing is the commodity, and the examiners are expected to produce intangible results in a product. The notion of a Utility Examiner (UTEX) shows some of the ways in which the bureaucratic capitalist system suppresses employees, even when as productive as the character Shane Drinion in particular:

An interesting bit of trivia is that Meredith Rand actually outranks Drinion, technically, since she's a GS-10 and Drinion a GS-9. This even though Drinion is several orders of magnitude more effective than Rand as an examiner. Both his daily average of returns and his ratio of total returns examined to total additional revenue produced through audit are much higher than Meredith Rand's . . . since utility examiners are often the best at what they do, there is a disincentive in the Service against promoting them, since at GS-15 a Service employee moves into administration and can no longer travel from Post to Post. (*Pale King* 460)

The suppression of a UTEX comes from maximizing the labor and profitability of an employee, particularly skilled ones, by keeping them from remaining at a Post long enough for the superior to “go through the paperwork hassle of recommending someone for a promotion” before the employee can develop a “rapport with supervisors” (460). The UTEXs are in limbo, floated from post to post without earning more pay despite high efficiency levels. The rote examiners wonder “what motivations induce them to serve as UTEXs when the position is something of a career-killer in terms of advancement” (460-1). The theory of the rote examiners is that “there's a certain type of basic personality that's maybe drawn to the constant movement and lack of attachment . . . plus the variety of challenges, and that Personnel has ways to test for these personality traits” (461). Offering this as a tidbit of “trivia” downplays the ways in which Drinion is exploited. Even as an off-hand narrative remark, this information is nonetheless presented to readers in the midst of a conversation between the two characters Rand and Drinion. Salaries are brought up: “The difference between a GS-9's and a GS-10's annual salary is \$3,220 gross, which is not pocket change” (461). While UTEXs like Drinion are highly skilled workers and produce information better than the rote examiners for the IRS and the public, they are unable to produce social relations within the bureaucratic system, effectively rendering their intellectual labor (and therefore social relations) useless to their peers and management.

The “entrepreneurial skills” that Lazzarato outlines become a moot point given the UTEX's mobility and lack of rapport with management. The theory of personality put forth by

the narrative voice through Meredith Rand — that the IRS perhaps screens employees to find UTEXs — runs parallel to the capitalistic need to get the most amount of labor for the least amount of expenditure. How the UTEXs are chosen, in theory, characterizes the IRS’s internal mechanisms as predatory and effective, singling out workers who will voluntarily take a pay cut but outproduce everyone else. As Žižek argues in *Living in the End Times*:

According to what economists call “the law of one price,” identical products on offer at the same time, in the same place, with the prices clearly visible, will go for the same price. The key consequence of this law is that it is the lowest price which gets universalized: say, if there are 19 workers applying for 18 identical jobs and one of them is ready to work for only \$40 per day, they will all have to work for this sum . . . this “law of one price” puts workers at a big structural disadvantage. (*End Times* 209)

This “law of one price” is not universally acted out within the IRS, as we see that there is room for a move into administration by general employees; however, the UTEXs are a revolving pool which adheres to the law, remaining perhaps as Drinion does at GS-9 by being perpetually transferred. It is unclear what exactly motivates the UTEXs to be moved around and sacrifice advancing pay scales:

There is a certain prestige or romance to the UTEX lifestyle, but part of that is married or otherwise dug-in employees’ romanticization of the unattached lifestyle of someone who goes from Post to Post at the institutional whim of the Service, like a cowboy or a mercenary. Lots of UTEXs have come to Peoria since late winter / spring ’84 — there are a variety of theories about why. (*Pale King* 461)

While Wallace does not elaborate on these theories or provide a definitive answer, the most practical explanation is profitability. If the IRS can expend as little as possible on an incredibly productive employee, it stands to reason — under the late capitalist model — that utilizing as many UTEXs as possible would maximize results while keeping costs down.

Politics and Posthumanism: Becoming the Machines

In this section, I examine the idea of “the people,” first in relation to the IRS, then “the people” as IRS employees treated as and becoming like machines. This particular Regional

Exam Center's political appointee is director DeWitt Glendenning Jr., who is well-liked among the employees. As the book is unfinished, there is little information on Glendenning's background; however, a telling passage reveals what Glendenning believes about taxes: "If you know the position a person takes on taxes, you can determine [his] whole philosophy. The tax code, once you get to know it, embodies all the essence of [human] life: greed, politics, power, goodness, charity" (*Pale King* 84). Wallace-as-narrator chimes in to "respectfully add one more [quality]: boredom. Opacity. User-unfriendliness" (84). §43 discusses Glendenning's management style in detail, told from the perspective of an unnamed employee. The current office talk is about a terrorist attack on another Post: "This isn't terrorism. This is people not wanting to pay their taxes" (434). In complete contrast to the background news, the narrator lavishes praise upon Glendenning:

I didn't know a person at the Post who didn't like and admire DeWitt Glendenning . . . Nobody ever felt that Mr. Glendenning was putting on an act of any kind, the way less gifted administrators do . . . Or that glad-handing, my-door-is-always-open type who believes a good administrator needs to be everybody's friend. (435)

Outside of the lavish praise of the unnamed narrator, one particular scene gives readers insight to Glendenning's personality via dialogue in an elevator. None of the elevator riders are identified through the speaker's narration — the "I" merely takes in and participates in the onslaught on dialogue — so only contextual cues and the occasional name identify speakers, though not very clearly. Names mentioned include Glendenning, Stuart Nichols, Mr. X, and a third party who potentially may be one of them, who speaks through "I." The discussion is primarily about civics. Glendenning discusses Rousseau and de Tocqueville, and appears to be the most informed person in the elevator based on the dialogue cues. As one of the elevator's passengers states:

DeWitt's saying that if you think the corporations are evil and it's the government's job to make them moral, you're deflecting your own responsibility to civics. You're making

the government your big brother and the corporations the evil bully your big brother's supposed to keep off you at recess. (143)

In this sense, we get more of an idea about who Glendenning is than §43's discussion of his management style. Following the dialogue between Mr. X and Glendenning, we arrive at this declaration:

They [the citizens] hate the government — we're just the most convenient incarnation of what they hate. There's something very curious, though, about the hatred. The government *is* the people, leaving aside various complications, but we split it off and pretend it's not us; we pretend it's some threatening Other bent on taking our freedoms, taking our money and redistributing it, legislating our morality in drugs, driving, abortion, the environment — Big Brother, the Establishment. (137)

This section presents an interesting argument between two sides of the same coin — namely, that while citizens desire a powerful government to protect them from greedy corporations, they also hate the same government entity that gave them the IRS to take their money. “The people” desire a freedom from the institution that they rely on for regulation of institutions that would otherwise exploit them, though the larger debate as to whether or not American democracy is an exploitative enterprise itself lies outside the scope of this dissertation.

Approaching Glendenning's discussion of Rousseau from a posthumanist perspective, Conley Wouters's article ““What Am I, A Machine?": Humans, Information, and Matters of Record in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*” draws attention to this complex positioning: “Glendenning seems to be motioning toward something like the paradox of self-inflicted slavery that might be Americans' undoing, an unthinkable destructive political maneuver that is uniquely postindustrial and, in this novel, dependent on machines and information” (Wouters 451). Wouters points out the frequent conflation between human and machine in the novel, ultimately concluding that “cohabitational harmony between consciousness and information, machine and human, is both possible and productive” (Wouters 462). While this merger is “possible and productive,” Wouters paradoxically characterizes the men working around Dean as “no longer

even men, not beings capable of any type of extraprofessional activity . . . Their absence in the break room supports the frightening possibility that anything beyond base, rote functionality — i.e., anything human — has been eliminated from their existence” (454). The only thing saving Dean is his capability of “wonder” about the other men’s lives outside of the workplace, but Wouters does not address Dean’s rapidly distorting engagement in fantasy. I argue against the “possible and productive” conclusion, and particularly the assertion that Wallace “illustrates a way lived experience can become objective data, and vice versa” from a “hopeful, humanist impulse” (462). The novel repeatedly demonstrates that there is no potentially positive synthesis between data and experience. The most extreme example is Claude Sylvanshine, the “fact psychic,” who is burdened with intrusive thoughts consisting of sheer data:

Tastes a Hostess cupcake. Knows where it was made; knows who ran the machine that sprayed a light coating of chocolate frosting on top; knows that person’s weight, shoe size, bowling average, American Legion career batting average; he knows the dimensions of the room that person is in right now. Overwhelming. (*Pale King* 123)

These facts “intrude, crash, rattle around. One reason Sylvanshine’s gaze is always so intent and discomfiting is that he’s trying to filter out all sorts of psychically intuited and intrusive facts” (121). Fact psychics “almost universally refer to it as an affliction or disability” (120).

Sylvanshine’s character functions as a synecdoche for his fellow bureaucrats, nearly debilitated by the sheer volume of information that needs processing and does not necessarily possess an apparent end goal. The IRS workers complete their role-specific tasks and the forms disappear to another department, denying the workers the ability to see more broadly what they’ve accomplished. Bureaucratic structure obscures the intersecting impact of the bureaucratic world on the real world, leaving the lower-level workers without any goals other than completing as much paperwork as possible, which is the accomplishment in and of itself.

In Alain Badiou's essay "Twenty-Four Notes on the Uses of the Word 'People,'" he argues for a reconception of the word "people" in the modern era: "we must abandon to their reactionary fate expressions like 'the French people' and other phrases in which 'people' is saddled with an identity. Where 'the French people' in reality means nothing more than 'the inert mass of those upon whom the state has conferred the right to call themselves French'" ("Twenty-Four Notes" 23-4). Thus, "the people" is in fact "a category of the right of state" and serves little purpose other than to confer a status upon a particular set of individuals and remove undesirable persons from a larger body of people (24). In this sense, democracy has evolved to exclude "everybody [from being] equally qualified to conduct the public affairs" (*Economy and Society* 948). The "naive belief in the civic virtue of the common people" as discussed in the elevator can be considered under Badiou's definition, to show that the "common people" do not necessarily have civic duties to exercise in the first place, and will stand behind the concept of government so long as it serves their needs against corporations (*Pale King* 136). The irony of this, as discussed earlier, is that the IRS is beginning a transition to be run more like a for-profit corporation, and as an arm of the government no less. The "common people" will then have nothing between them and the government-corporate entity of the IRS, and their lackadaisical attitude towards civics may be their undoing.

The employees, in the shift from the industrial to information economy, must fill the role of "machine" particularly as the pressures of late capitalism demand ever-increasing output. Even the computer database mixup of the David Wallaces needed human workers to step in and temporarily perform the task of the machine to fix the issue. And yet the novel works to show these workers as humans despite the roles they must perform, digging into their personal histories and thoughts to elicit sympathy from readers. The IRS began using e-filing systems in 1986 — albeit in a very limited manner — one year after *The Pale King* is set, which suggests

that the creation of such a processing system is underway during the novel (IRS Media Relations Office). As of 2011, the year of *The Pale King*'s publication, "Approximately three out of every four individual tax returns were filed electronically" (IRS Media Relations Office). In the IRS' "Integrated Modernization Business Plan" of April 2019, the Service aims to "implement technology to scan and store incoming paper forms and correspondence in an electronic format" by 2024 ("IRS Integrated Modernization Business Plan"). Although there are initiatives to digitize paper records, there still exists a need for human examiners to verify paper forms and e-returns, even as automation increases under various initiatives for "modernization." Even if paper forms were entirely eliminated, the IRS still relies on personnel for coding and automation systems maintenance. The role of human workers shifts from manual processing to a supervisory role over the systems doing the processing.

In another sense, the bureaucrats can be seen as machines in the sense of lacking empathy or sympathy. The IRS' 1984 publication *Human Factors in the Implementation of the Automated Collection System*, a compilation of research, memorandums, pamphlets, and other documents related to the Automated Collection System (ACS), emphasizes the need for employees with limited compassion, again, highlighting the immense difficulty presented by the Spackman Initiative for an IRS that maximizes profits while appearing sympathetic to the taxpayer:

The single most positive comment by ACS employees is the excitement and the challenge they encounter when trying to convince debtors to pay their past due taxes. This "battle of wits" involves discussion, logical reasoning, persistence and a convincing manner. If you are challenged by the problem of motivating or convincing someone to do something, which they should legally and morally be doing anyway, collections may be for you. (*Human Factors* 141)

In framing collections as a "battle" over something which is moral, the IRS positions itself as a righteous entity charged with enforcing morality prescribed by the State. Its collections agents are tasked to perform not just legal duties, but also impose moral authority. By extension, all

workers are in some way checking for adherence to a moral code through a bureaucratic process imbued with the legal means to enforce the code, and in doing so the IRS can be seen as an impassable, unsympathetic entity concerned only with following a strict set of rules, much like an automaton. This links back to Glendenning's discussion of the IRS as paradoxically "of" and "against" *the people*, where the IRS is comprised of citizens tasked with enforcing a moral code which everyone dislikes. Agents can only carry this out by becoming more machine-like, checking their emotions while emphasizing rules and process to complete their task.

Conclusion

Wallace's characters experience the slow violence of late capitalism in the form of physical and mental deterioration. While readers do not always get a complete view of the many characters' lives, work at the IRS only increases the likelihood of maladies the longer the workers stay. Electing to write a narrative situated within a bureaucracy, Wallace details an unusually sympathetic view of bureaucrats — particularly since they work for the IRS — and in doing so critiques the work culture of late capitalism and the progression into an information economy. Despite the potential for automating some of the menial tasks, the bureaucratic structure instead lags, forcing workers to act as machines to extract as much data from the returns as possible, and then pass that data along to other workers who also perform rote tasks. The traumatic elements of the work are much more evident in workers such as Lane Dean Jr. since he has a more complete narrative, but minor characters — reflected in Blumquist's "getting a taste" comment and details such as the teeth marks — are suffering as well, due to the nature of the work.

As Hardt and Negri argue, we see that "in the postmodernization of the global economy, the creation of wealth tends ever more toward . . . biopolitical production, the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and

invest one another” (Hardt and Negri xiii). Increasing demands on workers through the totalizing culture of late capitalism (and ultimately Empire), are organically developed from bureaucratic structures, which are themselves products of western political disposition towards “democracy.” Wallace ultimately offers a retrospective into this development, as seen through the fictionalized account of the IRS, but also a warning of unstoppable biopolitical production and trauma, keeping readers uncomfortably close to bureaucratic work at the heart of an increasingly information-based economic system. The undercurrent of slow violence in an information economy reveals itself in Wallace’s novel, and the novel allows suffering to speak on behalf of bureaucratic subjects within late capitalism. Wallace reacts against the dehumanization of employees within the bureaucratic processes. Returning to Gorz on meaning and humanization, attempts by the IRS to become more consumer-oriented and “friendly” do not make late capitalism and democratization any more humanized. Consumers are alienated by the bureaucratic system at the same time that the workers are alienated on the inside of the apparatus. As a novel, *The Pale King* allows for the readers to empathize with the bureaucrats, while maintaining the safe distance that a fictional work can offer. The asymptotic curve of readers’ experience brings them ever closer to the trauma of bureaucrats, without actually experiencing the work themselves. The Nietzschean conceptualization of art and “horror of existence” allows for the horror to be on display without transference of trauma to readers, building an empathetic relationship with the bureaucrats. The novel opens a space which allows suffering to be spoken in the medium of art, utilizing the medium of fiction to express the broader socioeconomic and political traumas developing out of an increasingly global information economy, shown in the synecdoche of office work and bureaucratic responsibilities.

CHAPTER III: THE BEAUTIFUL BUREAUCRAT

Outline

This chapter begins with **The Dirty Blvd.: Poverty Wages and Induction**, briefly discussing Josephine and her husband Joseph's impoverished circumstances at the start of the novel and Josephine's reasons for accepting her particular job against the background of late capitalism. The section **Deterioration: Trauma and Decay on the Job** details the nature of Josephine's bureaucratic work, her subsequent tedious tasks, and physical decay, moving into the trauma Josephine experiences from her work. **Mutations and Permutations: Trauma and the Real** addresses the importance of the word "bureaucrat" to Josephine and the significance of it to trauma, transitioning into a discussion of the notion of the "unspeakable" in trauma theory. **Reconsidering the Unspeakable: A Necessary Discussion of Privileging in Trauma Theory** uses N. Mandel, Stamphl, and Leys to create a critical conversation around a flaw in traditional trauma theory as practiced by Caruth and others, giving testimony and "unspeakability" a privileged status and setting limits on the representation of suffering. The next section, **Suffering at Arm's Length: Keeping the Reader from the Text's Trauma** integrates Nietzsche on art, along with Horkheimer and Adorno's critiques of culture, to discuss the novel's role in conveying suffering and horror to readers through its medium, before returning to address the psyche's methods of defense against trauma. **Witnessing and Abstraction: Expressing Suffering** begins with Vogler's examination of "witness literature" and continues into how the novel expresses suffering, which is to say in Adorno's terms, to create a condition of truth, and allow for an immanent critique of late capitalism. The last section, **Final Blows: Terminations**, addresses the immediate violence of the bureaucracy against Josephine and Joseph by forcing a miscarriage in a final display of the bureaucracy's all-encompassing nature.

Introduction

Helen Phillips' novel, the most recently published text selected for this dissertation (2015), is the most focused depiction of contemporary informatics labor among these novels. The protagonist, Josephine's, job is to cross-reference data sheets and correct errors, alone, in a tiny windowless office. She does not know the purpose of her work, nor does she see any results until the end of the novel, when it is revealed that Josephine is confirming the dates of birth and death for people in a causal relationship: when the form says the corresponding person will die and Josephine confirms it, the death will occur, making Josephine complicit. While Josephine begins to suspect her role with increasing paranoia, she endures it as she and her husband are impoverished, frequently unable to afford housing or groceries. She is slowly subsumed into the body of the company, becoming little more than an extension of the work. Of characters in all four selected novels, Josephine's on-the-job decay and trauma are the most visceral and immediate to readers, and she is ultimately fired due to her husband — unbeknownst to Josephine or readers, also employed by the nameless bureaucracy — falsifying paperwork in their favor to create a child, which is forcibly terminated by her employer.

Josephine and Joseph seek upward mobility, but often with disastrous results. Confoundingly, they move to a more expensive sublet when the owner of their original housing returns, and it “promised to be better than this one . . . the owner of the third sublet had described it to Joseph as being ‘beside the bridge’ . . . they discovered that the bridge was really an entrance ramp onto the highway” (Phillips 103). The allure of “moving up” sends them to another dump, even further away from their jobs than the last, and just as temporary. This is repeated in a brief sentence: “One can always build one's life” (125). They are only doing “a little bit okay financially” after Joseph starts work at the nameless company (unbeknownst to Josephine) and as a result elect to immediately raise their cost of living (103). Living in a sublet,

eating convenience store junk food, and having to live in the dark when a single light bulb goes out indicates that the Newburys are still very much struggling to make ends meet. “What did we do to deserve this?” Josephine asks (104). They are trapped in a poverty cycle, never making enough money between two full-time jobs to escape renting in slums, and are unemployed by the novel’s conclusion. The novel offers only vague details about their pasts with Josephine stating that she and Joseph met at college, yet they are stuck in entry-level positions despite their implied education with no opportunities for advancement. Josephine and her husband start the novel in dire circumstances and come out of their jobs even worse. While they do not make enough money to effectively participate in the culture industry in a traditional sense, the compulsion to spend and consume is driven by the elusive cultural promise of upward mobility. Whenever their circumstances improve slightly, Josephine and Joseph will immediately look for ways to improve their lives, which results in a return to complete poverty. This is not to be critical of their attempts to escape sublets and processed foods; rather, I am highlighting the futility the couple faces in trying to gain any financial security, nutritional balance, safe surroundings, and so on. The novel is a startlingly bleak look at worker exploitation, bodily trauma, and suffering in a contemporary workplace, offering no optimism for the protagonist as she is dragged through each workday, performing a seemingly mundane task with horrific real-world consequences, returning home to housing insecurity and a bare fridge each night.

The Dirty Blvd.: Poverty Wages and Induction

To establish the socioeconomic baseline for the protagonist in this novel, I will discuss its opening and establishment of circumstances leading the protagonist to her job as a bureaucrat. The eviction of Josephine and her husband Joseph from their apartment establishes their home life: “Their bed was out on the sidewalk in front of their building, surrounded by everything they owned, all the objects they had brought with them from the hinterland” (9). The choice of the

word “hinterland” is particularly apt given their position in an unnamed and “faceless” city, contrasted with the nothingness of a hinterland past the “known.” What matters for this story is not the Kantian noumena of Josephine and Joseph’s pasts, nor the city they live in. The phenomena and knowable details of the story are dependent upon the bureaucratic structure and its periphery. Joseph toasts Josephine’s job with a sardonic attitude: “To bureaucrats with boring office jobs. May we never discuss them at home” (11). The irony being, of course, that they have no home at the present, but also that Josephine has already been sworn to absolute secrecy by The Person with Bad Breath regarding her job. As Wallace noted, secrecy makes something “interesting” rather than cloaking itself with boredom. Josephine’s job, while boring, is given the allure of secrecy by Josephine’s superior: “Perhaps you will find this work tedious . . . It is also highly confidential. Not to be discussed with anyone at all. Including *him* [Joseph]” (emphasis Phillips 7-8). This sets up a Chekhov’s gun wherein the secretive nature of the work *must* be revealed to Joseph, since he is expressly forbidden to know details about Josephine’s job. The book has established its climactic point wherein the bureaucracy and the “real world” will overlap, inasmuch as the bureaucracy regulates the real world. As their financial situation deteriorates further, Joseph and Josephine sublet part of a house, subsisting on “string cheese and peanuts and yogurt and M&Ms” (13). The two begin the novel almost at the lowest of the low, without shelter (temporarily) and with only a mediocre job for financial support — “Hourly rate \$XX.XX (not so very much, but so very much more than nothing)” (8). While Joseph struggles with the unfamiliar keys to get into the sublet a dog snarls at them, inciting fear in Josephine, who recalls their wedding day and a snippet of the Shaker song “Simple Gifts:” “*’tis the gift to be simple, ’tis the gift to be free, ’tis the gift to come down where we ought to be*” (emphasis Phillips 14). No context is given for the song being tied to their wedding; however, it serves as a

sort of allusion to the social circumstances that Josephine is currently experiencing. Josephine is living simply, but not by choice; she is not living freely under late capitalism.¹⁵

Deterioration: Trauma and Decay on the Job

In this section, I will introduce the trauma which Josephine experiences from her work. Josephine's physical pains begin almost immediately after she is hired. Josephine is taken to a "pinkish box of a room, its walls aged with tack holes and old tape. Five steps and Josephine could touch the opposite side. A metal desk and an outdated computer buzzed in the ill light of an overhead fluorescent. Beside the computer, stacks of grey files" (4). Josephine is presented with files, a page of which is reproduced for readers, consisting of a name and date, followed by an incomprehensible jumble of numbers, letters, and symbols enclosed in small boxes. Josephine is given "clearance only to complete [her] task" of data entry, limited exclusively to the name and date on the file (6). Almost immediately, the physical effects of the work to come kick in: "As Josephine tried to focus on [the files,] a headache took root behind her eyes" (6). Upon being informed that her job will not involve the entire page, Josephine notes that "her headache retreated slightly" (6). Josephine's task is singular: "Cross-check the number and name in the Database against the number and name on the form . . . Then input the date at the top of the form in the far right-hand column of the database" (7). The paper file is then moved from the inbox to the outbox, and the task is infinitely repeated. Josephine's task, she ultimately discovers, is entering the date of death for living persons, causing their death to occur on the date specified. "The form is always correct," The Person with Bad Breath states (7). The primacy of data and

¹⁵ The implications of invoking Shaker theology are vast for this novel; however, for the purposes herein, they are necessarily limited to lifestyle.

the form are nonetheless reliant on a human interlocutor to verify the paper record corresponding with the electronic record, allowing for possible mistakes. Were a mistake to be made, or an intentionally incorrect entry processed, this particular bureaucratic system would directly effect the real world with regard to life and death. Much like Wallace's parallel world, the movements and operations work in tandem with the world tangential to the bureaucratic apparatus.

Phillips is quick to show Josephine's deterioration on the job. Josephine "reward[s] herself with a trip to the bathroom" after fifty files are processed (Phillips 16). Upon looking in the mirror, Josephine sees that "her own eyes were more bloodshot than they'd ever been . . . she couldn't stand to look at them" (19). On her way back from the bathroom, Josephine inquires about a sound to her coworker Trishiffany, discovering it to be typewriters. "It could drive you mad, couldn't it? . . . But don't worry, it just blends into your brain. You'll stop hearing it after you've been here a little while" (20). In her office, Josephine finds that the supposed tack-holes in her wall were "scratches, smears, shadowy fingerprints, the echoes of hands . . . The four walls were very slowly, almost imperceptibly, moving closer together, pressing in toward one another, toward her" (21-2). After getting some lavender mints from the vending machine, she discovers that even what recreational confectionary work has to offer is harmful: "Halfway through the pack, her tongue started to bleed, cut by the candy as it disintegrated in her mouth, sharp as bird bones. But all afternoon she kept eating lavender candies, inputting data, eating lavender candies, inputting data" (33-4). Everything about the office is viscerally oppressive to Josephine, but without the prospect of another job and facing homelessness, she is stuck at the company to earn her "not so very much" wage (8). As her work progresses, Josephine suffers increasing bodily injury:

Handling all that paperwork dried out [Josephine's] hands; they became so raw with paper cuts that she couldn't squeeze a slice of lemon. Her forearms ached, her jaw was permanently clenched, her eyes felt dusty. Yet she did what she had to do . . . For

nineteen unemployed months, she had sworn that if she ever managed to get another job, she would never complain. (25-6)

At any cost, then, Josephine is determined to see her job through. A key detail is revealed to readers: Josephine was without a job for over a year and a half before she joined the current company. Reduced to eating string cheese from convenience stores for dinner, whatever work came along would be satisfactory. Josephine is told that “you need the Database as much as the Database needs you!” (27). She becomes inextricably linked to her data processing job and the capitalized Database, referred to as an entity with needs tied to Josephine’s own “needs” as an employee. Later: “[Josephine] carried the Database around inside her; it floated in her brain like a net for catching and killing any glistening idea that came along . . . she confessed to Joseph: ‘I’m becoming a bureaucrat’” (29). The Database insidiously takes over Josephine’s thoughts, leaving no room for her own personal reflection or development.

Intriguingly, although the Database is the cornerstone of all information as processed in the novel it sometimes “lags behind” the paper forms (Phillips 7). As Josephine is instructed, “the form is always correct” (7). These forms appear and disappear before and after Josephine’s shifts without any person-to-person contact, perpetually existing to be moved from the master “In” pile to the “Out” pile:

The files continued, endless. She input 140, 150, 160 a day, experiencing at times a small feeling of accomplishment — and then the next morning there would be another pile of 147 or 153 or 164 awaiting her. She never knew who delivered them in the morning or who took them away in the evening. (Phillips 25)

Unusually for a contemporary data processing agency, hard files are kept as the primary source for data input; Josephine is asked only to correct small errors that the Database might have, such as misspelled names or incorrect dates. Despite the massive amounts of data the company retains in paper form, it is the Database that sticks with Josephine as an all-encompassing entity which permeates her thoughts, as discussed previously. Small reminders of the Database’s personified

presence crop up throughout the text: “The Database hummed, hungry” (77). While the physical paper which damages Josephine’s hands can remain at work, the Database takes on a life of its own both inside and outside of work, despite being the flawed entity.

Josephine’s complacency with her work is troubling in that she feels understanding her job is unnecessary so long as she performs to meet expectations. But what are the expectations? Josephine is given a varying number of files to check against the database each day and is sworn to secrecy regarding the incomprehensible mess of characters listed in each file. The job’s expectations are never made clear past this; in effect, Josephine lacks a sense of purpose and is compelled to do her work out of fear of unemployment, rather than perform any sense of “meaningful” contribution from her point of view. Josephine continuously suffers for her work, unquestioning:

Squiggly lines writhed across her vision. When a headache blossomed outward from deep within her skull, she scurried to the bathroom. She attempted to evade her own blank stare in the mirror by focusing on the intricate pattern of capillaries in her eyes, miniature red wires going in one side of her iris and coming out the other. She pitied her eyes as though they were delicate, abused animals that didn’t belong to her. Her skin was taking on the same sallow pinkish color as the walls of her office . . . She spent the rest of the day working as diligently as a robot. A dutiful, mechanical heart. (63)

As her eyes become increasingly bloodshot, Josephine dissociates from them in the abused animal simile. In her initial meeting with Trishiffany, Josephine notices how apart from being “perfectly put together . . . but those bloodshot eyes revised Josephine’s guess of the woman’s age . . . Josephine noticed that her own eyes were more bloodshot than they’d ever been. Not nearly as bloodshot as Trishiffany’s, but still” (18-19). Eye strain and irritation run rampant throughout the building, reflecting the tedious nature of the work in a physical manifestation of stress. Josephine slowly transforms into both the color of the building and mirrors the look of her coworkers’ eyes as she continues to work. Her fellow bureaucrats are described as “zombies”

and pay little attention to their surroundings, roaming the halls until they cordon themselves off in offices.

Having established her physical deterioration, I now turn to the significance of language in trauma theory. Josephine embodies the bureaucratic trauma and the abstraction of the work becomes manifest in Josephine's taking the label of bureaucrat. In the sense of the trauma she suffers, Josephine does not render her work unspeakable; rather, there are constraints upon her due to the very job that causes trauma to remain secret, and the thinly-veiled threat of a fireable offense forces the job to be unspeakable in a sense. At the same time, Josephine's trauma is evoked and realized through the title of "bureaucrat," a dicent sign in the Peircian sense, which causes the trauma to be retroactively recognized. In utilizing N. Mandel's approach to trauma theory, I am able to circumvent the prevalence of "unspeakability" in the field of study and instead focus on how Josephine embodies trauma and is able to articulate her position within the novel, along with realizing her traumatic experiences and the corporeality of them, rather than impose a ceiling on her experience via the limits of language. To do so would fall into the "trap" which privileging unspeakability sets in trauma theory; instead, abstracting to the question of the rhetoric of trauma in late capitalism will allow me to account for the trauma present when Josephine is interpellated into the role of bureaucrat and speaks her position.

The circumstances under which Josephine utters the word "bureaucrat" are important to consider for the purposes of signs evoking trauma. I have already described Josephine's home life with Joseph and the "gloomy grime" of their sublet (Phillips 29). Immediately before realizing her transformation, Josephine's thoughts are of the Database, and the aforementioned quote ("She carried the Database . . . idea that came along") is the sign which triggers the second stage of the trauma (29). Josephine is "sitting on the blanket on the floor, looking deep into the heart of the cheap white wine in the plastic cup" in the moment she utters her sentence to Joseph

(29). The physical trigger for Josephine is her living conditions under late capitalism, inside a filthy sublet which is the last resort to keep her from being homeless. Protecting herself from the floor, “overlaying [the sublet] with a home of their own,” the blanket is under the cheap glass of intoxicant Josephine uses to deal with her circumstances. (29) The blanket is “spared from storage,” something which was not stolen from them while their furniture was out on the curb following eviction (29). To reiterate: Joseph’s immediate reaction is to suggest healthy alternatives to drinking wine. As he gets up to look for carrots, Josephine repeats the password for work: “‘89805242381!’ she whispered to herself. It almost felt good” (29). As Josephine undergoes the transformation into bureaucrat proper, she grounds herself with the crucial entryway into her computer terminal. In saying that it “almost felt good,” Josephine reveals that she is beginning to be satisfied with her work and position within late capitalism. She asks Joseph: “Doesn’t my voice sound like the voice of a bureaucrat” (29). After exchanging her Social Security number with Joseph aloud to memorize, Josephine notes that “She was feeling happy again. An exchange of secrets always helped” (30). It is precisely at this moment that we see Josephine break the “unspeakable” mandate of her job and fully become a bureaucrat in a moment of epiphany.

Mutations and Permutations: Trauma and the Real

Extending my analysis of trauma in the text, I will now incorporate both Freudian and Lacanian approaches to Josephine’s circumstances to elucidate the manifestations of trauma Phillips portrays. Condemning herself to the label of bureaucrat, Josephine’s transformation is spoken aloud in worry to Joseph and met with the health-centric commands “Drink some water . . . Eat some vegetables . . . Drink up, bureau rat” (29). Joseph’s view of bureaucracy as a health issue ties back into Josephine’s ailments from her work at the company. In becoming a bureaucrat, she sacrifices her health for the sake of a meager paycheck. Curiously, while Joseph

— as it is later revealed — works at the same company, sworn to secrecy just as Josephine is, he does not display the same level of issues that Josephine is having. On one occasion, however, Josephine comes home to find Joseph in the dark staring out the window. “He was not the type to gaze wistfully out of windows . . . there *was* something different about his appearance — it was in his eyes. An extra gleam. Maybe a fever . . . The rest of the night proceeded normally, though, and by the time they went to sleep, she had forgotten the uncanny first two minutes of their evening” (emphasis Phillips 31). It is perhaps at this moment that Joseph’s work begins to catch up with him, just as Josephine “carried the database around inside,” emptying his head of any thoughts other than those of work (29).

Evoking the notion of the uncanny, Phillips taps into the Freudian tradition of the strangeness found within the ordinary, in the sense that Joseph and Josephine alike experience moments in the ordinary (outside of work) of something uncanny (work, the Database, etc.). The Database begins to take over their lives as they are tied to it, clearing all moments for fantasy, acting as the “net” for ideas inside of Joseph and Josephine’s conscious and unconscious minds. Much like Wallace’s fantasy ocean of concrete and suicide-by-Jell-O, Josephine (and presumably Joseph, although we are not given access to his side of the story) cannot even keep fantasy to herself, a fundamental cognitive piece of a healthy mind. Without access to fantasy, Josephine cannot chase her *objet petit a*, as she is deprived of having a sense of attainment of the lost Thing as held by the Other, corrupting her sense of identity. And yet, her new constructed identity is uttered in the phrase “I’m becoming a bureaucrat” (29).

The role of the Real is perhaps explained best in an interview conducted with Phillips: “I often move through the world with the sense that there’s a nightmare version of everything hovering just beneath the surface . . . It’s about unveiling the uneasiness lying below the mundane. Josephine’s world is the uncanny, haunted version of the world I know” (Gayle).

Lacan's concept of the Real, as interpreted by Žižek, breaks down into several types based on which register of Lacan is being examined: the "symbolic Real," the "imaginary Real," and the "real Real" (for lack of a better term). These are discussed in terms of Freud's dream of Irma's injection:

If we start with the Imaginary (the mirror-confrontation of Freud and Irma), we get the Real in its imaginary dimension, the horrifying primordial image that cancels the imagery itself; if we start with the Symbolic (the exchange of arguments between the three doctors), we get language deprived of the wealth of its human sense, transformed into the Real of a meaningless formula. (*Lacan 66*)

The final iteration, the "real Real" outlined by *objet petit a*, is "not an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network, but the fissure within the symbolic network itself" (72). It is a breakdown of the symbolic order, while the *objet petit a* runs interference between the subject and the Real to prevent trauma. To continue:

[I]f what we experience as "reality" is structured by fantasy, and if fantasy serves as the screen that protects us from being directly overwhelmed by the raw Real ["real Real"], then *reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real*. (emphasis *Lacan 57*)

Phillips' lurking nightmare world of the text, of the Real, offers no structural fantasy for Josephine to engage in and as a result produces the "traumatic Real" in which Josephine exists.

Working from Freud's theory of sexual trauma and the primal scene, theorist Greg Forter discusses trauma which is "not punctual," in the sense that it arrives after the event, rather than registering as traumatic at the time (such as Freud's theory of the death drive in the First World War). As Forter argues:

A word, an observation, a sensory perception, a feeling — something in a person's present life sets off a chain of associations that lead to the first scene's unconscious "understanding," giving rise to intense anxiety precisely by making that scene *significant* and rendering it traumatic *for the first time*. (Emphasis Forter 264)

Josephine does not register her trauma until uttering the title of bureaucrat, realizing that she was interpellated into the role and upon hearing "bureaucrat" she was hailed into realizing her

trauma. It did not occur to her at work that any particular trauma was inflicted, despite the maladies suffered; however, outside of the context of her office, Josephine begins to realize the effect that her work is having on her, albeit indirectly. While Josephine takes on the title of bureaucrat, Joseph immediately directs her towards health-related options for her lifestyle to correct the implications of being a bureaucrat. As theorist Barry Stampfl argues, regarding Forter's modeling of trauma:

Thus, when Forter observes that the non-punctual trauma is not really traumatic until the second phase of his two-phase model — in Freud, the oedipalized moment of retrodetermining epiphany — he seems to make *realization* the core of trauma. A moment's reflection will convince us, however, that the conception of trauma as a darkly transformative epiphany is not necessarily antithetical to the idea of the unspeakable but may actually be quite exquisitely compatible with it. For — again — if we think of the unspeakable as a trope, a certain way of speaking, we must recognize that the unspeakable is always already (paradoxically) part of a universe of discourse, a form of signification. (emphasis Stampfl 25)

Josephine's realization seems rather bland and obvious when uttered to Joseph; however, it is a "return of the repressed" in the scratch marks on the wall and cut-up hands that bring a sense of horror to Josephine's new title. *Retrodetermining* her position, Josephine must unlock the trauma through an utterance, rather than let it remain "unspeakable." Josephine does not carry out repeated actions to re-live her trauma; rather, she is duty-bound to every day repeat her trauma at the office, particularly as she realizes how she is developing into the dreaded figure of the bureaucrat.

At the same time, Joseph does not admit to becoming a bureaucrat, presumably due to the secrecy he is sworn to as an employee of the company. Here, Josephine slips up and reveals that her work is bureaucratic in nature, slowly loosening the knot of secrecy she herself was sworn to by The Person with Bad Breath. While Joseph does not pry any further and proceeds to mock Josephine's realization ("bureau rat"), part of the nature of Josephine's work is now out in the open. The "primal scene" of data entry and her scarred office are recalled to the forefront with

the utterance of the word “bureaucrat” in a symbolic manner, as opposed to the unconscious compulsion to repeat traumatic activity and leave the true horror unspeakable.

Reconsidering the Unspeakable: A Necessary Discussion of Privileging in Trauma Theory

At this point in the discussion of trauma, it is important to note the semantics of the unspeakable against refusal to speak, particularly in Stampfl’s reaction to Naomi Mandel’s argument in *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America*:

In short, while it is more problematic to say “The Holocaust is unspeakable” than it is to say “I cannot tell you what happened to me at the Nazi death camp,” the two statements are obviously closely related. Speaking about the two as if they were qualitatively different — and then rejecting the first while honoring the second — does not make a lot of sense, and this incoherence is writ large, finally, in the elaboration of Mandel’s argument as a recommendation to “eschew” or “abandon” the unspeakable (24, 219). For the question thus arises: if we *were* to relinquish rhetorical evocations of the unspeakable, would this not be detrimental to our attempts to investigate, communicate, and commemorate traumatic events? No, it would not, answers Mandel, for alternative rhetorical strategies articulating “an ethics of complicity” in opposition to the unspeakable show promise of being “both ethically and critically productive” (24). (emphasis Stampfl 21)

While Stampfl worries that his summary of N. Mandel’s argument is perhaps too reductive, and admits to its nuances and complexity, it is nonetheless given as follows: “Those who wield the rhetoric of the unspeakable are both showing off and putting themselves on, posing moralistically while taking the easy way out . . . evoking the unspeakable in the context of trauma simply is not respectable” (17). Stampfl nonetheless finds flaws in N. Mandel, and suggests the alternative that “the unspeakable would be better understood as a special case of the unspeakable: the unspeakable in arrested development, as it were” (18). Again, Stampfl emphasizes that “the traumatized speaker evoking the unspeakable in fact has begun to speak” (21). While the Holocaust is an extreme example/referent for a book on bureaucracy, as is American slavery or the atomic bombings of Japan, trauma theory continually returns to these sites of the “unspeakable” throughout its development, and this is the field in which this

discussion of bureaucracy must be held with the important caveat of trauma theory's basis in events such as the Holocaust.

Crucially, I must delineate the problems that arise with using trauma theory, particularly when the main referent is the Holocaust. In no way does office work under a capitalist model compare to genocide. Trauma theory unfortunately does not leave a way around engaging with the Holocaust, so it is on these terms that I must make my argument, acknowledging the presence of trauma in bureaucracies while differentiating the nature of the trauma from that of Caruth's and N. Mandel's central referents. I agree with N. Mandel that privileging the notion of "unspeakable" is not an "ethically and critically productive" stance to take regarding trauma. As N. Mandel writes:

Like "the Holocaust is unspeakable," "the Holocaust is trauma" reflects a basic intentional fallacy by which a cultural production is posited as an irrefutable fact or at least a painful reality. It is on the level of this assumption of the Holocaust as *the* paradigmatic traumatic event that the implicit cultural and political agendas of trauma theory need to be approached. (N. Mandel 51)

N. Mandel's argument does not diminish the horrific nature of the Holocaust, but wishes to frame the question "what happens when a rhetoric of trauma is applied to the Holocaust?" (51). Acknowledging the difficulty of navigating a response, N. Mandel nonetheless desires to abstract the rhetoric of trauma *from* the Holocaust, rather than use the two as codependent concepts in the field:

Implicit in the concept of the Holocaust as trauma is the assumption that group identities and individual identities can be approached similarly . . . Further, identifying the Holocaust as a traumatic event generates a discourse that is predicated on the assumption that the Holocaust cannot be approached directly but only perceived indirectly, through its effects and repercussions . . . In other words, "the Holocaust is trauma" posits the Holocaust as engendering the very discourse that renders it unspeakable, while "the Holocaust is traumatic" posits a subjectivity for whom the unspeakable offers the terms of its articulation. (52)

Moving trauma from a “psychic to a cultural phenomenon” often overlooks the “political contexts that facilitate this movement or . . . the implications of such a movement for cultural identity” (54). In the same vein, N. Mandel goes on to cite Ruth Leys’s critique of Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience* and the “universalizing of trauma” in the sense that trauma is “detached” from history and instead becomes part of a “linguistic phenomenon” (55). Leys argues that Caruth’s universalizing via this concept of a linguistic phenomenon “proposes that whether we experienced the trauma of the Holocaust directly or not, each of us, in the post-Holocaust period, is always already a split or dissociated subject, simultaneously victim and witness, and hence always marked by the difference and division that characterizes the traumatized subject” (Leys 297). Ultimately, N. Mandel views the Holocaust as an important framework for trauma studies, but at the same time, one that risks aligning trauma and ethics: “The alignment of trauma with ethical engagement reestablishes inclusive and exclusive communities, here identified not geopolitically but juridically: to be traumatized is to be innocent; to be outside the limits of trauma’s discourse is to be guilty” (N. Mandel 58). Trauma theory begins to move away from the psychological definition of trauma and into “a discursive space for encounters with the real — encounters characterized by the eloquence of their gestures toward the real’s inaccessibility” (58). A complex issue, trauma theory as it has developed contains complexities and problematic elements, not all of which can be parsed in this dissertation. The main interest in trauma theory as it pertains to the contemporary fiction texts herein is that these depictions of bureaucratic workers allow readers to get close to, but not directly experience, the traumas of late capitalism. These texts function as asymptotes to labor and its demands on the contemporary worker in a bureaucratic setting. Fiction allows readers a distance from the trauma, but also allows for critique and alternative perspectives (i.e. other than the reader’s own experiences, if the reader is a laborer under late capitalism) on the nature of the trauma. For Wallace, this partially manifests

itself in terms of boredom and suicide. For Phillips, we see more of a physical deterioration of the body as Josephine's mind is put through punishing tedium. Again, the central referent of the Holocaust in trauma theory is not applicable to office work; however, N. Mandel's work as an abstraction of language can ask, "what happens when a *rhetoric of trauma* is applied to late capitalism?" I believe this allows an opening of late-capitalism-as-traumatic, wherein trauma theory can be applied to bureaucratic working conditions as represented in contemporary American novels.

To better distance this study of bureaucracy from trauma theory's extremes, I will examine the portion of N. Mandel's work concerning the results of "speaking the unspeakable:"

It is not the experience of victimhood that claims a moral status but, rather, critical work that presumes . . . to maintain the primacy of the victims' suffering over and above that suffering's representation. The rhetorical performance of evoking the unspeakable — identifying the limits of representation, comprehension, aesthetics, and speech — masquerades as ethical practice, and if I advocate "speaking the unspeakable," I do not mean, merely, transforming the silenced into speech. I am attempting to undo this masquerade, an unmasking that would reveal the critical and cultural apparatuses that wrote the script and set the stage, and the actor who dons the mask for her own purposes. When the unspeakable is spoken, I will argue, this collaboration is undone, and the actor's body, her *corporeality*, moves to center stage. (emphasis N. Mandel 12)

N. Mandel's claim is that to put the unspeakable "beyond the limits of language facilitates a certain safe distance of the object of study from the study itself, paradoxically reinforcing atrocity's inaccessibility to knowledge in the context of knowledge's production and practice" (13). Again, we have the word "atrocity" at the core of this passage, implicating trauma theory's attachment to something far more extreme than office work; however, I argue that on the macro level of late capitalism, there *is* an atrocity occurring in the exploitation of subjects on a global scale. It is here that we find, as Hardt and Negri argue in *Empire*, a revised notion of Empire which is no longer limited to capitalist investments in colonial territories. Instead, a nebulous system of power has encircled the globe, inflicting capitalism on agrarian and industrial

economies along with information-based economies. Empire's decentralized role scrambled "spatial divisions of the three worlds (First, Second, and Third) . . . we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second almost nowhere at all. Capital seems to be faced with a smooth world" (Hardt and Negri xiii). As the First World creeps into developing nations, so do the possibilities for bureaucracies like Josephine's to spontaneously form (as noted by Weber) and inflict the traumas of late capitalism. On a macro scale, then, Empire can apply consistent force and conditions to cause physical and mental deterioration of its subjects.

Suffering at Arm's Length: Keeping Readers from the Text's Trauma

Stepping back from the novel for a moment, I will now consider broader implications of late capitalism and trauma. A global system of trauma has formed and snippets are represented through novels such as *The Beautiful Bureaucrat*, acting as a proxy for and metanarrative of Empire's subjects. Readers of *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* are subjects of the very Empire they are reading about and experiencing, to whatever degree, the same trauma that they are distanced from via the text. As Nietzsche argues in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, "Art forces us to gaze into the horror of existence, yet without being turned to stone by the vision" (Nietzsche 10). In the sense of Horkheimer and Adorno, readers of the novel may not realize the irony of encountering a text detailing readers' own oppressive conditions due to the culture industry's conditioning: "To be entertained means to be in agreement" (Horkheimer and Adorno 115). At the same time, they argue for absurdity:

Absurdity in the manner of Mark Twain, with which the American culture industry flirts from time to time, could be a corrective to art. The more seriously art takes its opposition to existence, the more it resembles the seriousness of existence, its antithesis: the more it labors to develop strictly according to its own formal laws, the more labor it requires to be understood, whereas its goal had been precisely to negate the burden of labor . . . its realization, of course, cannot be allowed. (113-4)

The absurdity behind *The Beautiful Bureaucrat*'s depiction of Josephine's circumstances is very much real as provided by the absurdity of late capitalism's demands; however, in that this realization of absurdity cannot take place under the culture industry, readers find merely entertainment value in the literature rather than critically observing the very same circumstances under which they are being read replicated on the page. For Adorno, in *Negative Dialectics*, the only way out is immanent critique, to allow for an expression of suffering under culture's hold. Given the complexity of Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) critiques of culture and existence, it would seem that breaking the spell is an elitist activity for armchair philosophers rather than the "common man." I believe, however, that fiction allows for easier access to exposing the conditions of late capitalism and Empire. As a "notable book of the year" in the *New York Times Book Review* for instance, *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* has been "culturally approved" for readers. By placing the trappings of a mass-market paperback around an unflattering portrayal of late capitalism, the text's audience is permitted to indulge in something "safe," perhaps a relatable sense of drudgery and frustration with their jobs. But the book, I argue, is a simulacrum of late capitalism which ultimately suggests the possibility of existence itself as a product of bureaucracy. The text suggests that all life on earth is reducible to code and data entry, as Josephine discovers at the end in the building filled with files of genus and species of earthworms.

The lines between absurdity and reality, however, are not so clear-cut under late capitalism. Within a system which seeks to maximize productivity from its subjects, is Phillips' depiction of Josephine and her job so absurd? Regarding the shift from a manufacturing economy to an information economy, Lyotard states:

Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange . . . It is

widely accepted that knowledge has become the principle force of production over the last few decades. (Lyotard 4-5)

Lyotard poses the questions: “who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?” (9). These questions are currently being answered by the gathering of data on citizens, from both government and private sector entities. As a prolific example, Facebook’s Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018 speaks to Lyotard in that (reductively) a private sector company gathered data from citizens’ Facebook profiles — a fraction of whom had consented to sharing the data — and utilized this data to create “psychographic profiles” for targeted political advertising (Rosenberg, Confessore, and Cadwalladr). The scope of this dissertation will not allow for an in-depth discussion of the topic; however, it serves as a contemporary example of Lyotard’s questions put into effect. Personality traits, political affiliation, personal associations with other citizens as “friends,” and so on were deemed to be knowledge, and the decision to utilize this knowledge was made by the private sector, despite Lyotard’s assertion that “the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government” (Lyotard 9). While government has its own collection of knowledge on its subjects, capitalism has created the market for companies like Cambridge Analytica to trade in knowledge, and therefore power. Josephine’s company is deliberately vague in its associations with either government or the private sector — though Josephine’s lack of vetting implies private sector, or perhaps a contractor — and has the power of life and death. These stakes are much higher than political advertising, but it is crucial to note that *all data* of living creatures is contained and managed within this particular bureaucracy. The exact nature of how this data is used is unclear; however, the company could not afford to pay employees without maintaining some level of profit off this information. The question of “who knows what needs to be decided” remains unanswered in *The Beautiful Bureaucrat*. Management has already made decisions, though what these decisions are

neither readers nor Josephine know. The work must continue as it always has, churning through employees one after the next until inevitable burnout or termination.

Returning to the text, Josephine's second epiphany comes when she realizes the nature of her work. She begins to parse out patterns in the coded sheets, identifying strings of numbers as dates, and ultimately, births and deaths. Josephine begins to recognize names from her files in cemeteries and news of deaths in the paper. Initially, she begins to dissociate the names from the files:

Names swelled and ebbed beneath her fingertips. She began to forget they represented flesh and blood. Instead, it became a kind of game, the search for funny names, names that sounded as if children had made them up, any scrap of entertainment amid the endless and endlessly average names. (52-3)

Josephine accepts her position as "she sat at this desk like the captain of a tiny ship; she knew what to do and how to do it; she was well hydrated. Tonight, after completing her allotted tasks in a methodical fashion, she would go home to [Joseph]" (53). After seeing coincidences of deaths aligning with her data input, Josephine declares to Trishiffany:

"I realized what I do here" . . . She hoped Trishiffany would probe into this declaration, would tell her that she was mistaken, that she'd misunderstood everything . . . that she wasn't the bureaucrat queen of death dates. (93)

Trishiffany comes back to the central issue of Josephine's willingness to work: "Don't you mainly just want to have a good life with your husband and kid where you don't have to worry about being unemployed" (93). Josephine receives praise for being "very precise, very discreet. You do it with more compassion than others might" (93). Despite her inquiries, Josephine is left with no particular explanation as to how her work directly affects the people that the data corresponds to:

"Sometimes you get to see nice things happen," Trishiffany continued. "Remember Viola Pink Olguin? Alive and well. Thirty-three years old. The chemo worked, the car didn't skid, who knows. But bless her." . . . "So who picks the dates?" Josephine demanded. "Things get closed out when the time comes for them to get closed out. The same fifty-

seven thousand or so people die in this city each year, the same fifty-five million or so die on the planet each year, Josephine Newbury or no.” (93)

Josephine notices the veneer of Trishiffany’s makeup fading, and “the sight filled her with pity, for herself and for Trishiffany, stuck in this place without windows, pushing fatal paper while their skin and eyes degenerated, while they degenerated” (94). When Josephine declares that she quits to The Person with Bad Breath, she is ignored. “You can’t quit . . . you are someone who has yet to use herself to her full capacity . . . we will see you back here next week” (100-1). However cryptic Josephine’s boss is, they hint at the pressures of late capitalism: “full capacity.” Josephine can’t quit because she needs the money, and dutifully return the following week to continue working. The company has yet to extract the maximum value of labor for the cost of employing Josephine. While “full capacity” is not explained, given Josephine’s rapid deterioration, this presumably means to whatever capacity her mental and physical state can endure for the wages provided. The marks on the walls suggest that she is easily replicable with another body until it too is worn out. Josephine is willing to endure the trauma of knowing that she is instrumental in the deaths of between “147 or 153 or 164” people per day, for the money. Josephine decides that “she could live with this, with the gray files piled on her desk; she could be the one who ferried names from this side to the other. She could — she could see the dignity in that” (125-6). The stutter in the narrative indicates a hesitation, though whether this is on the part of the narrator or in Josephine’s thoughts is left ambiguous. But the hesitation is key to seeing Josephine’s comfortability with her work, referring to the “dignity” that comes with the position despite her initial horror. In the most abstract of ways, readers “bears witness” to Josephine “bearing witness” to the impending demise of the persons listed on the forms, although she does not know exactly how the people are going to die, nor does she directly see their deaths, though the aftermath is made clear. During her quest to find out the exact nature of

her job, Josephine pursues a boy named Arturo Benjamin Pesavento, whose death is listed for that day. After an initial mix-up with Arturo's older brother, Josephine notices a key detail:

[T]he sagging GET WELL! Balloons tied to the window bars, the altar surrounding the miniature blue Virgin cemented into the pavement beside the stoop, the soggy teddy bear and the ribbons and the notes and the soccer trophy. (79-80)

Upon returning home, Josephine declares to Joseph, "I hate my job . . . you hate yours too, right? 'Misery loves company. 'It's boring," he said, "But it's great, in a way'" (86). Joseph's function at the company is only hinted at. His optimism, despite boredom indicates that he is likely not dealing with deaths, or has not realized his purpose, or even perhaps sees dignity in his work as Josephine is starting to. Phillips hints at Joseph working in births as he orders maternity clothing for Josephine, as she realizes aloud to a waitress, "before the baby was even conceived" (144). Since this nameless company deals in data and filing, Joseph nonetheless performs as a bureaucrat, though he is better at maintaining secrecy about his role than Josephine is (as she did reveal herself as a bureaucrat to Joseph).

To further understand the role of trauma, I will now consider the role of dissociation. While not exclusive to trauma, is nonetheless closely tied to traumatic events as a defense mechanism. Sigmund Freud initially examined the term "defense" in 1894 (*The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence*) to "describe the ego's struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects. Later, this term was abandoned and, as time went on, was replaced by that of 'repression'" (cited in A. Freud 42). Freud changed his mind in 1926, desiring to take back the old definition of defense, more clearly delineating that the old definition would be appropriate "provided we employ it explicitly as a general designation for all the techniques which the ego makes use of in conflicts which may lead to a neurosis" (*Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* 163). As Anna Freud notes, "we have direct refutation of the notion that repression occupies a unique position among the psychic processes, and a place is made in psychoanalytic theory for

others which serve the same purpose, namely, ‘the protection of the ego against instinctual demands. ’The significance of repression is reduced to that of a ‘special method of defense’” (A. Freud 43). Ultimately:

The ego is victorious when its defensive measures effect their purpose, i.e. when they enable it to restrict the development of anxiety and unpleasure and so to transform the instincts that, even in difficult circumstances, some measure of gratification is secured, thereby establishing the most harmonious relations possible between the id, the superego, and the forces of the outside world. (A. Freud 176)

While Sigmund Freud never clearly addresses the concept of dissociation, instead blanketing the concept of repression (and then re-extracting the notion of defense), dissociation in the Freudian model works in some way to shield the ego and twist the experience into some variety of “gratification.” In Josephine’s dissociation of her eyes from her body in the mirror, the simile of “delicate, abused animals” allows Josephine to observe herself from an emotionally distant position. She recognizes the experience of pain and discomfort, but does not have to deal with it herself since her eyes are, at that moment, not part of her body anymore and therefore acceptable to pity. Josephine’s body is being incorporated into the company’s body, operating as a mere extension of the Database and her work.

Witnessing and Abstraction: Expressing Suffering

To further understand the role of trauma in literature, I will now consider Thomas A. Vogler on the supposed authenticity of “Araki Yasuada” in the 1990s as an example of what readers expect out of witness literature:

[Witness literature] is most bound up with notions of authenticity and referentiality, a poetry that puts us in touch with raw *facts* of existence rather than *effects* produced by rhetorical technique. With their umbilical connection to reality severed, the same words suffer a radical transformation of value . . . a special relationship between the poet and poem and reader is called for if we are to have a poetics of witness. A special attitude (faith, belief) in the reader is necessary in order to produce an authentic reading; and there must be special signs in the production of the text signaling the reader that the poem deserves such a reading. This is the literary equivalent of what economists call a

“fiduciary system,” in which consumers exchange pieces of paper worthless in themselves for goods of real value. (emphasis Vogler 174)

The Beautiful Bureaucrat is not witness literature in the traditional sense of, for instance, a Hiroshima survivor’s journals. I argue that via cultural production, the novel does allow readers to bear witness to the conditions of late capitalism through the buffer of fiction. A few points need clarification: In the case of “Yasuada,” regarding authenticity, author Bradford Morrow claims if it’s “just someone being empathic in another culture fifty years later, it’s legitimate but not as interesting” (Nussbaum 84). The concept of “bearing witness” comes into play regarding legitimacy. Josephine, in a fictional world, does bear witness to the deaths her work causes, both before (as an unknowing participant) and after her realization. In a doubling move, readers bear witness to the cultural production of a novel in which late capitalism is present and performing. This goes back to the Nietzsche quote, wherein art shields readers from the Real which they otherwise confront on a daily basis, though buffered by the culture industry. The “raw facts” of existence are conveyed *through* the “effects” of rhetoric. Josephine’s experiences are “inauthentic” as they are fictional. At the same time, the novel works to depict an evolving information economy under late capitalism via Josephine’s work as a data entry employee, allowing for the aforementioned distancing effect from the Real. Josephine’s graphic deterioration mirrors the afflictions of office workers, much in the same way that Wallace’s characters are at risk for “paracatonic fugues” and “unexplained bleeding” listed in the internal memo.

Readers of *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* witnesses Josephine’s deterioration, while Josephine simultaneously witnesses the effects of her work (though readers are not directly party to her findings, perhaps sparing us of the worst). As an abstract form of witness literature, whose purpose is to bring a fictional representation of bureaucratic work towards readers without

actually causing an affliction, the novel sacrifices the authenticity of events (fiction) for the sake of art's effects on readers. Vogler references Nabokov on the differences between literature and the "true story," using the metaphor of "crying wolf" — namely, that Nabokov claims that literature begins when the cry of wolf goes out, and no wolf (or boy) actually exists. Citing Bertolt Brecht, Vogler references a "sense of urgency that compels the poet to confront the danger and use the power of art to cry wolf" (Vogler 175). Using lines of Brecht's poem "Bad Time for Poetry," Vogler outlines an argument for poetry's purpose:

In my poetry a rhyme
Would seem to me almost insolent.
Inside me contend
Delight at the apple tree in blossom
And horror at the house-painter's speeches.
But only the second
Drives me to my desk. (Brecht 331)

Vogler, using Brecht as a specific view of art's impetus, continues:

To identify a moral and political role for poetry in this manner, to insist that it is the poet's duty to cry wolf when there *really is* a wolf, is to go against a longstanding tradition of art as a form of creativity free from the compulsions and contingencies of the temporal. (Vogler 176)

Outlining historical trends in the value of poetry, Vogler ultimately settles on contemplating "the emergence of such an aggressive desire for the real" (180), utilizing Forché's concept of "situations of extremity:"

[T]hose situations whose horror exceeds the ability of any form of language or genre to describe or communicate adequately . . . it is rather the idea of the event, and an idea that evokes the magnitude of the event precisely through an inability to encompass it fully. (183)

While critics such as Harold Bloom, Vogler argues, valued poetry with an "ahistorical, subjective, self-contemplative focus . . . a poetics of subjectivity that is valued precisely for its 'universality' [and] its distance from any contingent historical context," witness literature and

poetry rely on precisely the opposite — a definitive historical context that is decidedly *not* universal in the sense of being “better” for abandoning historical referents (176).

Witness literature for Vogler engages in complex ways with authenticity and the ability to critique art. Vogler cites critic John Berger’s essay “Hiroshima” — reflecting on images in the book *Unforgettable Fire* — who hands the baton back to the artists who survived the bombing (*hibakusha*), as “my interest in these pictures cannot be an art-critical one. One does not musically analyze screams . . . These were images of hell” (Berger 288). Berger’s viewpoint, as made apparent from this passage, is similar to what N. Mandel objects to in the privileging of trauma as the limits of language; a closed system. Vogler then turns to the infamous statement of Adorno, often misquoted, so some context is required:

Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. *To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric*. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. (emphasis mine *Prisms* 34)

Reification is poised to stifle creativity, commodifying the art form entirely and *presupposing* that the identity of the concept and the object are identical. Poetry became intrinsically tied to an exchange-value against a use-value, ultimately getting at the core of the negative dialectic: a “nonidentity between identity and nonidentity,” which cannot be fully discussed within the scope of this chapter (“Theodor W. Adorno”). The questions of authenticity and authorship, however, have been raised in this passage. If absolute reification is imminent, what status can be afforded to the author who would then be speaking purely on behalf of culture instead of engaging in authentic expression? It is important to note that Adorno later walked back his statement in *Negative Dialectics*:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you

can go on living — especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. (*Negative Dialectics* 362-3)

To invoke the Holocaust at this point in the chapter may seem hypocritical, given everything that preceded it. I evoke it as a necessity in the discussion of Adorno's works as they relate to trauma, suffering, and expression. Adorno's point gestures beyond the Holocaust and to modernity, insisting that there is a form of barbarism ("inarticulacy") in coming to terms with what is widely seen within trauma theory as the core traumatic event of the 20th century. What are we to make of life following such horror, Adorno asks, and how can this be expressed? This returns to the notions of reification and suffering. The author, in the wake of Auschwitz, is unable to fully articulate the conditions of life following an epochal atrocity. The legitimacy of an author walks a fine line regarding authority and referent, but suffering itself is authentic and, for Adorno, must be expressed in a particular way:

Where the thought transcends the bonds it tied in resistance — there is its freedom. Freedom follows the subject's urge to express itself. The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed. (*Negative Dialectics* 16-7)

Adorno does note that "mouthing profundities will no more make a man profound than narrating the metaphysical views of its characters will make a novel metaphysical," so an expression of suffering cannot be as literal as declaring that one is suffering; rather, the suffering is a *condition* brought about by objectivity and culture (15).

In this sense, *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* — and indeed the other novels discussed herein — are expressing suffering under late capitalism, as manifested by bureaucratic and office work. The authors are able to speak in a position of authority on late capitalism because they are culturally-constructed subjects within the very system they are critiquing; at the same time, simply being aware of this position does not enable everyone to successfully critique the pressing

objectivity merely by pointing out that it exists. To express suffering in a successful manner requires the privileging of art. This is not to say that art is elevated to the point of being immune to critique, just as placing survivor testimony behind the “limits of language” backstop and using it as a way to claim moral status is problematic.¹⁶ The novels work to crack open late capitalist ideology, allowing suffering to be expressed and set the conditions for truth via their status as art, containing both “import” and “function:” “art keeps itself alive through its social force of resistance . . . what is social in art is its immanent movement against society” (*Aesthetic Theory* 226-7).

Final Blows: Terminations

This final section examines the conclusion of the novel and the implications of a complete bureaucratization of everyday life, as depicted in the text. After taking a day off work to avoid the stresses of her epiphany, Josephine returns to continue her data input without worrying about the consequences: “The Database hummed as it always hummed. Today the sound struck her as neutral; perhaps even benevolent” (Phillips 127). Josephine notes as she starts that it is “the first file she had ever knowingly processed. It was less harrowing than she had anticipated. She remained calm as the names came rushing up at her” (128). Josephine even begins to consider pulling a name from the files for her unborn child, as “every name she encountered was a possible name for the beast” (128). Phillips juxtaposes Josephine’s developing fetus with the Database and death: both are “beasts” to be fed names and data.

¹⁶ For an insightful discussion of the deconstructivist positions and their limitations within the trauma field, see Kansteiner and Weilnböck’s critique of Caruth, particularly in the sense of how Kansteiner and Weilnböck argue Caruth uses traumatic events as a vehicle to explain how language works rather than offer a productive insight on trauma itself.

Deciding to appropriate part of her work into her personal life, Josephine “would steal a name from the Database and give it to the beast. A good, solid, strong, fanciful, flexible name. A name for a beast to do with as it wished — gnaw on, or cast aside” (126). Josephine is described eating lunch “as though she was only the most minor of accomplices” (129). Unbothered by her role in the company, and indeed the world at large, Josephine casually enters dates for three dozen files before stopping at her husband’s file, aligning at that day’s date for his death. While it could be anyone with the same name and birthday — even noting that “there are plenty of Joseph Joneses. Plenty of Joseph David Joneses” — Josephine panics and runs with the file (130). Phillips returns to the role of the bureaucrat, asking the rhetorical question “what greater act of courage can be expected of a bureaucrat?” (132). It is as much of a direct action that Josephine can commit. The causality and temporality are off, however, as readers (and Josephine, who does not recall at this point in the text) have previously been told the nature of the files and the Database: “The form is always correct; occasionally the Database lags behind” (7). By removing the file and leaving work, Josephine has only managed, at best, to delay the *confirmation* of the information in the file with the Database. Even the paper could contain a mistake, as Trishiffany pointed out with the Olguin file, rendering Josephine’s “action” a mere gesture.

Returning to the office compound, Josephine ventures past the door Z, now revealed to be her entrance, and makes her way up the alphabet to doorway A, having pieced together that Joseph works in data entry for creation rather than destruction. She realizes that to blend in despite not knowing where to go, she must perpetually be in motion: “stillness was dangerous; a real bureaucrat never pauses” (148). Finally stumbling across an unlocked office with a fellow bureaucrat in it, Josephine momentarily forgets the performative nature of a bureaucrat and becomes the frustrated everyperson encountering the system, in the same way that the DMV’s customers may rage against the bureaucracy they encounter. Josephine oddly forgets her position

as someone within the bureaucratic system and becomes frustrated trying to figure out how to get information from the *other* bureaucrat in the room, who is a caricature of the stereotypical non-sympathetic and perpetually-deferring bureaucrat: “Rules is rules, ’he said, offering up a fraction of a shrug” (151). Josephine feels “that old anxiety of the DMV” while talking to the bureaucrat, positioning herself against the bureaucracy rather than as an insider (149). She is shut down at every attempt to find Joseph: “May I ask [your supervisor] one quick question? ’ ‘Unfortunately, that’s not the way it works. ’It was hard to believe that this person had a home, a bed, a history; that he existed outside the confines of this office” (150). After providing Joseph’s HS number and figuring out that he works inside the Department of Genesis, the bureaucrat still proves unhelpful in locating Joseph. He “seemed to relish [Josephine’s] agitation” while she waits for the Database to locate Joseph’s information, and after she emphasizes that the search for Joseph is an emergency, the bureaucrat quotes a variant of Bob Carter’s: “*Your poor planning is not my emergency*” (151-2). Given all that readers have seen of Josephine, and establishing Joseph’s relatively relaxed personality throughout the novel, Phillips writes a surprisingly unflattering depiction of a bureaucrat. While the “sworn to secrecy” mantra plays out in this interaction, it is a stark contrast to the sympathetic portrayal of Josephine-as-bureaucrat. The other bureaucrat’s existence “outside the confines of this office” is difficult to imagine, and his attitude towards Josephine is confrontational, ripping apart the established sympathy for bureaucrats that Phillips has evoked via Josephine. Bureaucrats go back to being impassable roadblocks caught up in rules and regulations, impossible to see outside of their role; one-dimensional.

Where Wallace’s bureaucrats’ inner and outer lives coexist with their work, Phillips demotes them to a caricature against Josephine’s complicated relationship with bureaucracy. The

only other bureaucrat who is truly sympathetic is Joseph, and he too is worse for wear given his job:

For the first time, [Josephine] noticed that his eyes were bloodshot too. Less so than hers, far less than Trishiffany's, but bloodshot nonetheless. It was unsettling to think she had been blind to such a detail. She examined his forehead, searching for signs of disruption to the skin, but his face was unmarked. Apparently Department "A" was better for one's skin than Department "Z." (157-8)

Joseph reveals that he "*created* the file" for their child (and therefore their child) in the uncanny version of cause and effect that the paper files and Database allow for (159). In a final confrontation with Trishiffany and The Person with Bad Breath, it is again revealed that altered rules of cause and effect are in play, as Josephine's file included details that she would steal Joseph's file, encoded somewhere in the indecipherable symbols and code. Due to a clerical error on Joseph's part, in an attempt to enter the embryo formation date, he instead entered his date of death, starting the "death processing" which is how Josephine discovered Joseph's file (168). Demanding the files to be corrected and re-processed, Trishiffany and The Person with Bad Breath will correct Joseph's errors and allow him to live at the expense of their child's life. Trishiffany declares, "Nothing malevolent here, dear! We're all just doing what we have to do" (169). The Person with Bad Breath echoes the sentiment: "There's nothing benevolent here either. I'm not doing favors, I'm doing paperwork. Getting all the ducks in a row" (170). Phillips' bureaucrats are entirely unsympathetic to suffering, instead viewing their work as merely paperwork rather than the creation and destruction of life. Much as Josephine "could see the dignity" in the data entry of death (and therefore causing death), the other bureaucrats are entrenched in complacency and comfort in their actions. Perhaps Joseph and Josephine could have ended up the same way, had Josephine not discovered her husband's file and continued to work for the corporation. Josephine's miscarriage is the final destruction of and trauma to her

body and psyche, concluding her work as a bureaucrat as she is fired. Trishiffany notices that Josephine's "skin's already improving" as she approaches the terminus of her work:

When [Josephine] opened her eyes, her lap was filling with blood . . . 'You're both fired, of course. 'The Person with Bad Breath lifted two fingers to those dry lips and smiled at Josephine, the gentlest of gestures, something somewhere between the sign for 'hush 'and the motion that preceded blowing a kiss" (171-2)

Where Josephine began to heal from the trauma of being a bureaucrat, the bureaucracy inflicted an extreme bodily trauma before releasing her, a final reminder of her helplessness before and within a late capitalist system. Commodified information is used against Josephine, and Phillips uses the medium of fiction to explore the uncanny effect of being the "sum of our data" in a literal sense, accounting for errors and corrections needing to be made with a causal relationship to everyday life. The truly sinister nature of Josephine's workplace is revealed with her miscarriage through a numerical correction on a form, as readers are no longer observing the slow violence of Josephine's deterioration at a desk, but the immediate violence of death and grief in real time. Neither Trishiffany nor The Person With Bad Breath show any concern for Josephine or her spouse, promptly firing both of them on the spot. It remains unclear if the Database generates the forms automatically, or if there is some other form of causation; many questions are left unanswered, although the secretive nature of the company and its departments invite speculation for all its functions.

Conclusion

Phillips' novel takes a turn into the fantastical: a warehouse full of files marked with genus and species, implying a totalizing of data as related to all life on earth. Everything can be known and reduced to equations and symbols in absolute reification, wherein the identity of objects and concepts are the same and fixed. Only the novel can provide an expression of suffering, as it is revealed that Josephine could not authentically do so all along. The novel must

speak for Josephine, then, and reveal (in an exaggerated manner) the traumas of late capitalism and the increasing number of bureaucratic systems. As a sympathetic bureaucrat, Josephine provides a humanizing element to an otherwise indifferent system as depicted within the novel, and allows for the expression of suffering to take place; namely, through the traumas she endures by the system. The novel protests the commodification of data and the information economy, products of late capitalism, by depicting trauma as it manifests itself in Josephine's work and working conditions. While readers witness the slow violence of Josephine's tedious data entry tasks and her pondering complacency with the nature of her work, a glimpse of the Real comes in the novel's final moments when Josephine is directly affected by the consequences of her company's actions, and by extension, her own. Management performs a correction of the form — ordinarily Josephine's job — ending the life of her unborn child. Josephine must leave with this knowledge of the Database and the files dictating the lifespans of everyone she knows, and that someone will replace her for a pitiful hourly wage to eventually process Josephine's own death in a windowless office. Readers are spared the forbidden knowledge and trauma; Josephine is not, and she is left in an even worse state than at the novel's start.

CHAPTER IV: THE INTUITIONIST

Outline

This chapter begins with **A Necessary Discussion of Whitehead’s Language**, which examines the peculiarities of Whitehead’s language, transitioning into **“Suggestive and Evocative Rather Than Definitive:” Vagueness, Authenticity, and Obfuscation in The Text** to address the narrative time period, and blending of fact and fiction. I will then move to a Foucauldian framework in **Authenticity: “What Does It Matter Who Is Speaking”** to discuss Lila Mae’s sense of identity and personal fulfillment in relation to suffering. The next section, **The Complications of Identity Politics and Domination**, discusses bureaucracy as it intersects with systems of oppression — primarily fueled by capitalism — which work in hand with/as bureaucratic structures to oppress people of color. Using Asad Haider’s Leftist critique of identity politics along with Weber’s concept of *domination* in organizational structures, I argue that trauma and slow violence come into play as bureaucracy, both in corporate and political form, is leveraged against employees of color through the section **Bureaucracy, Exploitation, and Ostensibly Progressive Values**, along with a brief discussion of historical trauma as it plays out with Pompey and Lila Mae. I then move into an examination of “passing” in the novel and the ways in which capitalism intersects with race to exploit the characters of Lila Mae, Pompey, and Fulton in **“Passing” and Profit**.

Introduction

The Intuitionist follows Lila Mae Watson, a bureaucrat in an unnamed city in an unspecified era – although contextual clues indicate a Civil Rights era major city in the Northeast – working as an elevator inspector. Lila Mae’s position is unique in that she is, in the author’s terminology, the first “colored” female inspector. In addition, there are two competing schools of

inspection: Empiricism and Intuitionism, of which Lila Mae belongs to the latter. Intuitionism, founded in key texts by a multiracial “passing” man named Fulton, is somewhat of a synesthetic methodology to detect potential faults with equipment. A major project named after a former slave, the Fanny Briggs building, experiences a catastrophic elevator crash following Lila Mae’s inspection, putting her reputation at risk along with the school of Intuitionist thought, with an upcoming election in the Elevator Guild between Intuitionism and Empiricism tainted by the crash. As Lila Mae investigates the elevator failure independently, she uncovers mob intervention in city elevator contracts and corporate espionage between competing elevator companies, all the while encountering hostility against her race and gender. Ultimately discovering Fulton’s secret of “passing,” Lila Mae decides to continue his work by writing the remainder of Fulton’s texts and developing the “black box,” a theoretically perfect elevator design adherent to Intuitionist principles, to escape “stunted shacks” of the present: “If Otis’s first elevation delivered us from medieval five- and six- story construction, the next elevator, it is believed, will grant us the sky, unreckoned towers: the second elevation” (Whitehead 61). By the end of the novel, Lila Mae realizes that the paradigm of the black box will involve a radical reconception of life itself, wherever implemented:

They will have to destroy this city once we deliver the black box. The current bones will not accommodate the marrow of the device. They will have to raze the city and cart off the rubble to less popular boroughs and start anew . . . The shining city will possess untold arms and a thousand eyes, mutability itself, constructed of yet-unconjured plastics. It will float, fly, fall, have no need of steel armature, have a liquid spine, have no spine at all. (199)

The importance and value of this black box cannot be overstated: for the elevator companies, this would be an invaluable technological revolution and financial windfall, and for Lila Mae, developing this device would be akin to fulfilling her life’s purpose rather than a financial incentive. It is crucial to note that Lila Mae performs almost the entirety of her labor in this novel

outside of work. It is done at the behest of individuals using her as a means to find Fulton's journals and acquire the black box, and while Lila Mae often sees the motive behind these requests, she pursues them out of an obligation to justice, which coincides with uncovering the reasons for the elevator crash. She is not compensated for her time in any way, yet her passion for Intuitionism and Fulton compel her to track down the journals.

Whitehead, in a 2001 New York Times interview, speaks preemptively about comparisons to Ellison: "Anytime an African American writes an unconventional novel, the writer gets compared to Ellison" (Zalewski). This remark about Ellison betrays a sense of exasperation with immediately pigeonholing novels such as *The Intuitionist* simply because of their authors and "unconventional" nature; in this instance, bureaucratic literature and detective novels. This is very much true of emerging scholarly debate around the novel, as evidenced in article after article on *The Intuitionist*.¹⁷ I will not rehash these comparisons as they extensively discussed elsewhere; sufficed to say, the subject is well covered, and as it applies in this dissertation, the notion of "invisibility" and "passing" are the most relevant.

A Necessary Discussion of Whitehead's Language

Due to Whitehead's deliberateness in only identifying characters as "colored," "white," or through the use of slurs spoken or thought by characters, I will occasionally have to use the term "colored" in quotes out of necessity as Whitehead rarely offers distinctions or specifics about identity other than a binary relationship between people who are "colored" and "white" within the novel. While the promotional matter on the back cover explicitly refers to Lila Mae as

¹⁷ See Russell (2007), Tucker (2010), Leise (2014), Maus (2014), Grattan (2017), Morrison (2017), Sloane (2018), etc.

Black, the text rarely – if ever – elects to do so. The use of the term “colored” is highly problematic in the contemporary era, where the offensive term has been rightfully discarded from cultural discourse, and I do acknowledge this; at the same time, Whitehead’s insistence on the descriptor “colored” is a highly conspicuous and deliberate choice that does not offer the nuances of identity that contemporary culture values. An in-depth discussion of this issue will continue later in this chapter. Lila Mae’s discovery of an interracial relationship at the core of the novel’s mystery makes Whitehead’s approach all the more effective when intersectionality occurs. Without the broad category of “colored,” the binary would not be inclusive enough to reflect white characters’ animosity towards everyone else. The animosity is not directed at particular group identities, but towards anyone who isn’t white, necessitating broad terminology which diminishes nuance as nuance doesn’t particularly matter to the characters within the novel. Ultimately, the author minimizes nuances and draws focus to the racial disparity between “colored” and white characters, as the characters do not particularly care about distinctions which results in a Manichaeian approach from both sides.

Use of the term “colored” evokes America’s history of institutionalized racism, particularly in the Jim Crow era of “separate but equal,” yet it also evokes a particular literary antecedent: Zora Neale Hurston’s “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Hurston describes multifaceted feelings towards being “colored,” but does not describe it as necessarily negative, instead embracing her position and transcending race altogether:

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife. (Hurston 539)

Hurston feels “most colored . . . against a sharp white background,” such as at Barnard College, yet at other times “I have no race, I am *me*” (emphasis Hurston 540). This being said, however, Hurston is approximately a generation before Lila Mae given contextual cues, suggesting that Lila Mae’s experience as “colored” is during the Civil Rights Era and the culture is perhaps more openly hostile. Nonetheless, both accept – to various extents – the term “colored” as an identifier, positioning themselves opposite the white residents of the cities.

Whitehead’s deliberate use of language within the Department serves to divide not only the two methodologies, but also appropriates racially insensitive terminology. The Department’s divisions between Empiricists and Intuitionists lend to conspicuous insults against Intuitionists, such as “swamis, voodoo men, juju heads, witch doctors, Harry Houdinis. All terms belonging to the nomenclature of dark exotica, the sinister foreign. Except for Houdini, who nonetheless had something swarthy about him” (Whitehead 57-8). This terminology is part of the common lexicon, as Lila Mae’s inspection in the opening pages of the novel demonstrates. Without physically inspecting the elevator — instead, “intuiting” the mechanisms — the building super declares, “You aren’t one of those voodoo inspectors, are you? Don’t need to see anything, you just feel it, right? I heard Jimmy make jokes about you witch doctors” (7). Lila Mae responds with one word: “Intuitionist” (7). Lila Mae appears indifferent or used to this Othering language, and while her thoughts on it are never expounded upon, it is clearly culturally ingrained in the Department, the Institute, and among those tangential to elevator inspectors. In addition, given Whitehead’s deliberate linguistic choices, Lila Mae’s Department callsign is the conspicuous “Zulu 34.” While the NATO phonetic alphabet was deliberately constructed for clarity, the use of Zulu in *The Intuitionist* implies the Otherness of Lila Mae through reference to an African ethnic group in addition to being at the end of the alphabet, reflecting her position at the bottom of the Department despite having worked there for three years. Whitehead’s deliberate choice of

language consistently reminds readers of Lila Mae's status as a person of color, increasingly contrasted against other characters as the novel progresses.

“Suggestive and Evocative Rather Than Definitive:” Vaguery, Authenticity, and Obfuscation in the Text

A key issue for consideration is that Whitehead is deliberately vague in locating the era and place of the novel. Various critics and reviewers have attempted to place the novel, but Alison Russell is perhaps most accurate in describing the novel as “a revision of American history,” primarily grounded in detective fiction, other literary predecessors, and the Harlem Renaissance (Russell 46). The novel, for Russell, is “suggestive and evocative rather than definitive” (48). While complexities of the novel's setting are often briefly discussed in other scholarship about *The Intuitionist*, I believe a more extended look is worthwhile as Whitehead deliberately utilizes obfuscation and misdirection in nearly every aspect of the novel, and the setting is the most sweeping and omnipresent example of this technique. Fact and fiction are frequently intermixed, presenting a world which parallels reality but picks moments to call attention to itself as “unlike” and “like” often simultaneously. Contextual clues indicate that the novel is likely set during the Civil Rights Era, through a quick reference to “a head shot of the famous reverend. The man who is so loud down South,” followed by Lila Mae's curiosity: “They let you have this picture up” (Whitehead 248). The building where the novel's impetus occurs (the failure of an elevator) is named after the fictional Fanny Briggs, “a slave who taught herself to read” (12). Whitehead writes:

[T]he times are changing. In a city with an increasingly vocal colored population . . . it only makes sense to name the new municipal building after one of their heroes . . . the Mayor is shrewd and understands that this city is not a Southern city, it is not an old money city or a new money city but the most famous city in the world, and the rules are different here. (12)

Other cues indicate that the city is either New York or a stand-in, such as a mural in the Briggs building depicting “two beaming Indians trading beads to a gang of white men — the infamous sale of the Island” (47). Cycles of various immigrant groups and gentrification are mentioned, along with the description of the Institute for Vertical Transport as a former “health spa for rich neurasthenic women from the Northeast’s larger cities,” later closed in favor of health spas “in the weatherless regions of the Southwest” (43).

Whitehead’s omission of a specific time or place makes all events relative to one another, particularly in the frequent jumps from past to present and between characters, except for one event: July 14th of 1853, at the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations in New York. Even with this day, location, and event (Elisha Otis’s safety demonstration), some of the details are subtly incorrect beyond the necessary dramatization. Whitehead inserts a speech delivered by the Vice President of the US to the crowd gathered at the Crystal Palace, but as of that point in time the US did not have a Vice President, as William R. King died in April and did not have a successor until 1857 (United States Senate). The speech, delivered by a nonexistent VP, is poignant but entirely fabricated. It extols the virtues of industrial capitalism that are reflected in the novel’s elevator manufacturer competition perhaps a century later:

The distances which separated the different nations are rapidly vanishing with the achievements of modern invention. We can traverse them with incredible speed. The publicity of the present day causes that no sooner is a discovery or an invention made than it is already improved upon and surpassed by competing efforts. The products of all the quarters of the globe are placed at our disposal today and we have only to choose which is the best and cheapest for our purposes, and the powers of production are entrusted to the stimulus of competition and capital. (Whitehead 81)

This speech acknowledges a global industrial economy underpinned with the element of competition. Notably, the speech specifies the choice of “best and cheapest” options, implying a “race to the bottom” between international manufacturers to seek the highly improbable intersection of low cost and high performance. Otis’s demonstration is highly stylized, but as it is

the genesis of all events in the novel, it needs to be delivered with a “bang,” or rather lack thereof:

The rope dances in the air as the final strands give. The platform falls eternally for a foot or two before the old wagon spring underneath the platform releases and catches in the ratchets of the guard rails. The people in the Exhibition still have a roar in them, even after all they have seen this day. A Safety Elevator. Verticality is not far off now, and true cities. The first elevation has begun. (82)

Otis’s event is greatly minimized by the other material in this section; references to the future destruction of the Crystal Palace, the other exhibits and demonstrations, and other interests of the crowd who “want the future after all” (81). The fictional speech takes up more space on the page than does Otis’s event (approximately half of a page), starting from the point that Otis says “please watch carefully” and begins to cut (81). Whitehead’s preamble to the most important event of the novel — an event which allows the transdiscursive position of Fulton, originator of Intuitionist thought — is extraordinarily detailed compared to the event itself. Otis cuts a rope, the elevator platform enters free-fall, stops safely, and all is over in a matter of seconds and few sentences. Entire bureaucratic systems, schools of philosophical thought, skyscrapers, and modes of technology are formed in reaction to the demonstration, but only after the demonstration is set up by the speech. Whitehead takes advantage of readers’ general knowledge, as the Exhibition and Otis are easily confirmed in an encyclopedia, but placing a Vice President at a day, place, and time is far more difficult, particularly if no Vice President exists (proving an absence). While *The Intuitionist* is a work of fiction, it functions close enough to reality through historical references that Whitehead can offer a nonexistent person of note and the casual reader will not notice, giving credence to the speech as the narrative blends fact and fiction, distorting history just enough to make the speech believable, but not so much distortion that it will be dismissed as obviously false.

Whitehead's tactics recall Wallace's statement that "abstruse dullness is actually a much more effective shield than is secrecy. For the great disadvantage of secrecy is that it's interesting" (*Pale King* 85). Whitehead's ostensible subject matter — elevator inspectors — allows for great latitude with obfuscation, ultimately pointing towards questions of authenticity which pervade the novel. The opening pages are rife with Guild jargon: "On many occasions Lila Mae has returned to the Pit from an errand," "All the inspectors who have visited 125 Walker in the past have been Empiricists," "Arbo's patented QuarterPoint CounterWeight System," and so on (Whitehead 1-4). Technical details of elevators are included in the narrative:

125 Walker is only twelve floors high, and the vibration of the idling drive doesn't diminish that much as it swims through the gritty loop of the diverting pulley, descends down the cables, navigates the suspension gear, and grasps the car . . . Three Gemco helical springs are standard-issue buffers on Arbo elevators. (5-6)

Passages from the fictional volumes of *Theoretical Elevators* are interspersed throughout the text. A flashback to Lila Mae's verbal exam at the Institute for Vertical Transport reveals a similar mix of fact and fiction in the questions she is asked, ranging from the types of safety gears in elevators (factual) to court cases about restaurant dumbwaiters (fictional), again designed as purportedly obscure knowledge related to principles of elevator inspection. While little of the invented material is relevant to the overall plot, the exceptions are the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building (along with its namesake) for its representation of a former slave, and the passages of *Theoretical Elevators*, the philosophical core of Intuitionist thought, although it is revealed to Lila Mae through Mrs. Rogers that the author Fulton initially started the Intuitionist movement as a joke. Utilizing a "jargon of authenticity," Fulton obscures the joke well enough for it to go unnoticed by everyone, save his admission to Mrs. Rogers, his mistress.

The joke is not known to Intuitionist adherents, however, and Fulton's pseudo-intellectual — in light of the reveal to Lila Mae — musings about the potential of elevators is

taken as a serious threat to the competing Empiricist school of thought. The book-within-a-book is itself an exercise in obfuscation, mocking academics and stirring controversy while gaining adherents. As Mrs. Rogers tells Lila Mae about Fulton:

He'd been in a pretty good mood because his first Intuitionist book was doing alright. It had been hard on him but now he was getting what he deserved. When he finished that first book he showed it to them up on the hill there. His colleagues. And they just tossed him out of there — he couldn't get anyone to take it seriously. None of them wanted to touch it. So he paid for it himself, and it started. They believed it . . . he says to me, "But it's a joke. They don't get the joke." . . . They had all their rules and regulations . . . He told me — these are his words — "They were all slaves to what they could see." But there was a truth behind that they couldn't see for the life of them. (237-9)

Fulton's joke is connected to a serious metaphor on race and perspective, but the excerpts throughout the novel seem legitimate enough as philosophical thought on elevators to be taken quite seriously. Fulton writes on the inadequacy of language compared to the information conveyed by chemical impulses, linking this to the potential of the perfect elevator through the example of waiting to speak while boarding a train:

Remember the train, and that thing [time] between you and your words. An elevator is a train. The perfect train terminates at Heaven. The perfect elevator waits while its human freight tries to grab through the muck and find the words. In the black box, this messy business of human communication is reduced to excreted chemicals, understood by the soul's receptors and translated into *true speech*." (emphasis mine 87)

It is difficult to discern Fulton's intent in this passage, but the lofty metaphors and philosophical overtones of mortality, transcendence, and the invocation of "true speech" serve their purpose: to signal "this is *serious*." Lila Mae describes Volume One as possessing an "arid, academic voice," Volume Two as an "aimless mystic voice," but in Fulton's "lost" notebooks detailing Volume Three, "[t]he biggest problem, she finds, is nailing Fulton's voice . . . The optimism of this new book is taking some getting used to" and Fulton "truly understands human need" (254-5). No direct excerpts of Volume Three are given in the novel, as it is incomplete and the notebooks intended purely for Lila Mae's use; however, the implication in contrasting the three volumes is

that the Third dropped the pretensions of the previous two, resulting in an “authentic” voice striving to achieve the black box. Lila Mae is “just filling in the interstitial parts that Fulton didn’t have time to finish up . . . They just need a little something to make them hang together” (254). Mimicking Fulton’s voice invokes an order of simulacra, a fictional placeholder voice but based in the reality of Fulton’s work, striving for authenticity.

Authenticity: “What Does It Matter Who Is Speaking”

I argue in this section that Lila Mae finds purpose and an authentic self through her work on the black box and filling in Fulton’s manuscript, but she does so through mimicry and therefore obscures her own actualization of authenticity. Fulton has been fully revealed to Lila Mae through his notebooks and Mrs. Rogers, but the unfinished work necessitates interpretation and speculation. As Russell argues, regarding Lila Mae’s task:

Lila Mae literally moves from the margins to the position of inscriber and becomes the voice of textual authority. Lila Mae alone possesses the key that can break Fulton’s ‘code and hieroglyphics’ (254). She has mastered Fulton’s handwriting and style, writing a new text that contains his voice, as she has interpreted it. One might wonder whether this final act of literacy — of making the book speak — is suspect if Lila Mae, to speak and to be heard, has to impersonate Fulton’s voice. (Russell 58-9)

Russell reads Lila Mae’s actions through Gates’s *Signifying Monkey*, positioning her as Esu who represents “open-endedness.” While it is certainly true that Lila Mae’s project is open-ended in the sense that “Fulton left instructions, but she knows she is permitted to alter them according to circumstances . . . She will make the necessary adjustments,” Lila Mae is nonetheless limited by *needing* to replicate Fulton and continue his design (Whitehead 255). It is unclear why this notion of “permission” persists given that Fulton is dead and Lila Mae is operating outside of the Intuitionist academy; that she needs permission, despite taking on Fulton’s voice and authority herself, Lila Mae remains a secondary figure even though she can make alterations and interpretive moves, effectively ignoring whatever instructions were left by Fulton. It may be a

colloquial turn of phrase to indicate that Lila Mae has Fulton's "blessing" to continue his project, but the choice of "permission" strikes a contradictory tone with how Lila Mae accomplishes her work.

While Russell makes a compelling argument for reading the novel in terms of Gates' *The Signifying Monkey*, covering some of the same ground I cover, Gates uses a different system of analysis and diverges from Russell, who distances themselves from how "the novel can be read as a journey to voice, to textual authority" (48). My concern is with the traumatic journey towards "true speech" and achieving authenticity, as well as an authority given to expressions of suffering as experienced by numerous characters within the novel. I diverge from Russell's interpretation exactly at the point where "final act of literacy . . . is suspect" (Russell 59). Where Esu is "indeterminacy" and "discourse upon a text," which is certainly a valid reading, this ignores the notion of authenticity which I feel is necessary to consider when discussing replication (Gates 26). The importance of simulacra is that while Lila Mae does have an open-ended project *after* completing Fulton's journals, she is not attempting to "write a new text" until she finishes the "interstitial parts" in Fulton's voice. Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" speaks to varying degrees of authenticity through the concept of the aura. Benjamin ultimately frames his argument against the rise of fascism "rendering [politics] aesthetic" through easily-reproducible mediums like film, his points about authenticity are applicable to Lila Mae's work (Benjamin 242). Lila Mae is augmenting — not duplicating — Fulton's work, yet she is doing so under the pretense of making it appear as if Fulton had authored the text, in effect reproducing Fulton himself through stylistic, linguistic, and content choices. As Benjamin explains:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has

experienced . . . what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. (221)

In addition, Benjamin discusses the concept of ritual, or the original “service” of the art:

The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition . . . It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value . . . But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice — politics. (223-4)

Given Fulton’s adversarial relationship with the Institute, his project turns political in the “joke” phase, but swings back to authenticity when he realizes that his “Intuitionist” school of thought could work as a grander narrative:

So no, Lila Mae sees, he does not believe in the perfect elevator. He creates a doctrine of transcendence that is as much a lie as his life. But then something happens. Something happens that makes him believe, switch from the novel but diffuse generalities of Volume One to the concrete Intuitionist methodology of Volume Two. Now he wants that perfect elevator that will lift him away from here and devises solid method from his original satire . . . Intuitionism is communication. That simple. Communication with what is not-you. (Whitehead 241)

Fulton’s work falls into each of the categories that Benjamin puts forth. His early works “were technical, arcane investigations of the mechanism. *Towards a System of Vertical Transport* is still a basic text for Empiricist thought” (Whitehead 100). Fulton initially participates in the ritual of elevator theory, the “cult” of Empiricism at the Institute. The volumes of *Theoretical Elevators* as they outline Intuitionist thought work a strange reverse progression as they start with political value.

Mocking the academics at the Institute, Volume One has a political function. While Benjamin would describe this politicization of art as the beginnings of fascism, Volume One has instead emerged towards the end of progression of works of art, setting up volumes Two and Three to engage more in authenticity and cult value, inverting Benjamin’s stages. Fulton’s

contentious relationship with his fellow faculty extends to “dunk[ing] the provost’s head in the punch bowl at the groundbreaking ceremony,” out of frustration and an oft-referenced “acting funny” between the publication of Volume One and Volume Two (Whitehead 237). Lila Mae suspects that Fulton’s erratic behavior is related to a visit from Fulton’s sister between publications, confronting him with his ability to “pass.” Fulton himself struggles with an inauthentic life, using his ability to pass as a way into academia. Lila Mae is not only writing Fulton’s voice as the Foucauldian author function, but also as a decreasingly political, increasingly authentic voice, all of which is in a transdiscursive position. By running Benjamin’s stages in reverse, this allows for Fulton’s work to reclaim itself from the initial spite volume and “joke” to recontextualize and repurpose Intuitionism as a metaphor for communication with the Other, which is lost on Intuitionism’s adherents as they are not in on the “joke.” Even as Lila Mae is able to work from Fulton’s notebooks to produce Volume Three, she cannot alter how the cult of Intuitionism will receive it, particularly as the joke is taken literally by the practitioners and subset of academics in the field produced by Fulton.

Russell notes the blend of fact and fiction but does not address this in the terms by which I am approaching, through the obfuscation of “true speech” to which Fulton alludes. At the conclusion, Lila Mae approaches this in a Foucauldian sense when she takes up the mantle of Fulton’s work, with regard to an “aesthetics of existence” as it relates to “Antiquity,” and the notion of authenticity:

But the will to be a moral subject and the search for an ethics of existence were, in Antiquity, mainly an attempt to affirm one’s liberty and to give one’s own life a certain form in which one could recognize oneself, be recognized by others, and which even posterity might take as an example.

This elaboration of one’s own life as a personal work of art, even if it obeyed certain collective canons, was at the centre, it seems to me, of moral experience, of the will to morality in Antiquity . . . the idea of a morality as obedience to a code of rules [Christianity] is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of

morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence. (“An Aesthetics of Existence” 49)

Foucault adds some clarification to his goals for *The History of Sexuality* in another interview:

It was a question of knowing how to govern one’s own life in order to give it the most beautiful possible form (in the eyes of others, of oneself, and of the future generations for which one might serve as an example). That is *what* I tried to reconstitute: the formation and development of a practice of self whose aim was to constitute oneself as the worker of the beauty of one’s own life. (emphasis Foucault “The Concern for Truth” 259)

While it is clear that Lila Mae cannot fully escape suffering under the forms of structural violence that she is subject to, her role as Fulton’s successor allows her to live as an authentic subject under late capitalism. This being said, however, there are issues within the Foucauldian framework which are necessary to discuss.

Complicating the matter of authenticity is the lack of control Lila Mae has over the author function and Fulton’s existing body of work. Despite creating a document blending her work and/as Fulton’s, the volume will inevitably fall under Foucault’s notion of the author’s name, whereby Fulton is a stand-in for multiple authors and subject to academic scrutiny to determine authenticity and value. Where John Johnston responds to Berlant’s critique of *The Intuitionist*, Johnston describes the conclusion as Lila Mae in the process of “becoming-Fulton — not an identification with or repetition of him but a relay of his desire for a better world that enables her to begin living her own time” (Johnston 868). While optimistic and perhaps how Lila Mae views her outcome, she *will* become a repetition of Fulton, so far as Intuitionism is concerned, through her authorship of Volume Three. This is not to say that Lila Mae embodies Fulton and is incapable of pursuing her own goals; rather, this repetition is inescapable so long as she intends to recreate Fulton’s voice as accurately as possible:

The author is also the principle of a certain unity of writing — all differences having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation, or influence. The author also serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be — at a certain level of his thought or desire — a point where contradictions

are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction. Finally, the author is a particular source of expression that, in more or less complicated forms, is manifested equally well, and with similar validity, in works, sketches, letters, fragments, and so on. (“What Is an Author?” 111)

Lila Mae leaves herself open to discovery through her relationship with journalists and elevator company executives: “The elevator she delivered to Coombs, and then to Chancre and Ben Urich, should hold them for a while . . . if it is not time she will send out more of Fulton’s words to let them know it is coming” (Whitehead 255). Fragments of Fulton’s notebooks were sent to “them,” left unspecified but plural. Slip-ups are ominously lurking, as “Sometimes she almost gets his voice down but then it flutters away and it takes her some time to catch it again” (254). Following St. Jerome’s criteria of authenticity, even if Lila Mae can produce “stylistic unity,” she still has to contend with a “consistent level of value” and the author being “defined as a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence” (“What Is an Author?” 111). If Volume Three appears too much of a departure from the preceding volumes, as it very well could, it may be rejected as an inauthentic Fulton. The paradox facing Lila Mae is that even as she comes into her own authentic self through her work on the black box, she risks unraveling her work-as-Fulton and being dismissed as inauthentic, voiding her success as “worker of the beauty of one’s own life” (“The Concern for Truth” 259).

I also partially disagree with Linda Selzer’s appraisal of the novel’s conclusion as an “increasingly solipsistic space . . . a retreat sustained by a questionable faith in technological perfection and by suspect fantasies of self-reliance” (Selzer 697). Selzer’s argument against “fantasies of self-reliance” is compelling, particularly when examining Lila Mae’s ending as a negative, characterized as “a black woman given over to a new form of social and technological rationalization that leaves her increasingly isolated from black community, progressively alienated from her own body, and ever more in thrall to the seductive attraction of *uplift*”

(emphasis mine 682). The concept of uplift, as traced by Selzer, introduces a problem into the narrative which Whitehead subverts:

Black people's continuing struggles against racist practices and representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led them to develop an ideology of uplift that unfortunately replicated some aspects of majority practice and discourse even as it struggled to subvert them. For example, the emphasis on self-help in uplift ideology, though admirable, also worked to shift responsibility for black people's condition away from corrupt social structures and towards supposed personal traits . . . redirected some attempts at social remediation away from the correction of racist practices and toward the policing of black bodies. In addition, the ascent of black bourgeois elites that is closely associated with uplift ideology sometimes serves to increase class divisions . . . and could strengthen identification with patriarchal forms of domestic and social authority. (681)

This may cloud readers' interpretations of *The Intuitionist's* conclusion, Selzer argues, by ignoring the problems within uplift ideology and in fact reinforcing it, despite Whitehead's problematizing of the ideology throughout the text. To reiterate: I agree with Selzer's critique, but diverge at the point of dismissing Lila Mae's work as self-alienating. It is entirely possible to read the novel as a critique of uplift while acknowledging that Lila Mae is striving for authenticity and creating her life-as-art. Returning to Adorno from a previous chapter: "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed" (*Negative Dialectics* 16-7). Lila Mae undoubtedly suffers, and by continuing Fulton's work she assumes the mantle of seeking true speech. Is Fulton's ultimate Intuitionism, to understand the Other, not to escape the burden of objectivity?

While it may seem that authenticity is complicated by Lila Mae's role as *Fulton's voice* when filling in his manuscript, this is not the case. Superficially, there is contradictory movement in Lila Mae's development wherein her work is moving her forwards, but the methodology of the work conceals forward movement. If she becomes successful in completing Fulton's work, it will not be celebrated as her own; at the same time, no one else is capable of the task Lila Mae is

performing. Lila Mae does not indicate that she is working for recognition, however, but for the goal of seeing Fulton's vision realized. She is able to find purpose and authenticity in pursuit of the second elevation, and Fulton's notebooks are the means by which this can be accomplished.

The Complications of Identity Politics and Domination

Continuing from the introductory remarks on Whitehead's use of the term "colored," the term seems to function much like Lacan's *point de capiton*, wherein "a particular signifier and signified become tied together, leading to an undisplaceable meaning, a meaning that cannot be altogether uprooted" (Fink 113-14). It is the grounding of the term "colored" from which meaning-making becomes possible in the novel; at the same time, it is broad enough to be a collective term, eschewing the issues wherein so-called "identity politics" complicate and subdivide members of the collective, severely hampering its ability to confront the oppressive Other. As Asad Haider argues against the contemporary iteration of identity politics, in a redefinition:

In its contemporary ideological form, rather than its initial form as a theorization of a revolutionary political practice, identity politics is an individualist method. It is based on the individual's demand for recognition, and it takes that individual's identity as its starting point . . . And because all of us necessarily have an identity that is different from everyone else's, it undermines the possibility of collective self-organization. *The framework of identity reduces politics to who you are as an individual and to gaining recognition as an individual, rather than your membership in a collectivity and the collective struggle against an oppressive social structure.* As a result, identity politics paradoxically ends up reinforcing the very norms it set out to criticize. (emphasis mine, Haider 23-4)

Haider admits that although the "redefinition may seem drastic," it falls in line with the frequent split between language and practice (24). Juxtaposing contemporary practice against the Combahee River Collective's ideological framework and other Black revolutionary projects, Haider critiques capitalism as a driving force inextricable with racism, and challenges to this structure through individualist means result in reinforcement of the status quo, wherein oppressed peoples "have no choice but to articulate their political demands in terms of inclusion

in the bourgeois masculinist ideal” (22). Haider’s argument is heavily nuanced and cannot be fully discussed in this chapter; however, it clearly identifies capitalism as a divisive system which exploits differences based on the construct of “race” to benefit the other construct of the “white heterosexual middle class” (22). Citing Wendy Brown, Haider identifies the middle class as an identity referring to “a phantasmic past, an imagined idyllic, unfettered, and uncorrupted historical moment (implicitly located around 1955) when life was good . . . the ideal to which nonclass identities refer for proof of their exclusion or injury” (qtd. in Haider 22). The fault in identity politics is the perpetual reinforcement of this middle class as the standard by which everyone is measured. This is not to say that the American middle class does not exist, strictly speaking; rather, it is culturally ingrained as a “false universality of . . . hegemonic identity” (22). Capitalism provides the myth of upward mobility to an ideal which, as the wealth gap increases and divisions based on race are exacerbated by capitalism, effectively does not exist except as an oppressive framework rather than a real economic position.

Invoking the concept of “the people” through Étienne Balibar’s definitions of *ethnos* (“an imagined community of membership and filiation”) and *demos* (“the collective subject of representation, decision making, and rights”), Haider argues that their contradiction as practiced in the United States is the “original sin of the American nation-state” (104). *Ethnos* gives a false sense of nationalistic unity, while *demos* is “meant to apply regardless of identity,” contradicting in the sense of cultural and legal Othering, such as with immigrants and “minority” populations (104). Despite promises of political equality and a spiritual unity as Americans, legal and economic systems prevent “the people” from truly being cohesive and able to take collective action.

I will now revisit Weber to extend my argument on bureaucracy and oppression. If the structure of democracy necessitates bureaucracy as the most natural and efficient form, other

forms of bureaucracy can be extended as a system of racial and economic oppression, mirroring the political and cultural apparatuses doing the same in the US. While Weber initially indicated domination as an economic form and later changed his mind, I believe that as capitalism progressed since his writings, economic-based domination needs to be revisited and acknowledged as a legitimate form. I am arguing for the consideration of bureaucratic form as the most natural development of an Ideological State Apparatus, which is not explicitly stated in Althusser, but the institutions listed can (and more often than not do) function as bureaucracies. Missing from the list of ISAs is an economic or corporate venture; however, such a system is likely to be produced at the intersections of educational, legal, and trade-union ISAs, wherein promotion of capitalist values and knowledge of the system would be produced. Following from Haider, Weber, and Althusser's analyses, bureaucracy produces, reproduces, and maintains a capitalist ideology which oppresses its subjects through subdivision while simultaneously requiring each subdivision in order to maintain the whole. Haider's argument for the entanglement of racism and capitalism originates in colonial legal codification of "whiteness" against slavery, paradoxically up against the notions of freedom in the US Constitution for "We, the People" – again, a contradictory legal/political practice.

Looking further into Weber, the notion of "domination" is at the core of bureaucracy. While there is some debate on the specific translation of the word *herrschaft*, for which the standard English translation is "domination," Weber explains that "bureaucratic administration means fundamentally domination through knowledge" (qtd. in Swedberg and Agevall 20). Swedberg and Agevall outline the three types of domination in Weber:

In the case of traditional domination, there is basically a belief in the sanctity of tradition and of those who exercise power according to tradition. In charismatic domination, there is a belief in some extraordinary individual and the order for which this individual stands. And in legal domination, obedience is not to a person but to the legal system according to which that person holds power. (88)

Considering these modes of domination, the terms “tradition,” “order,” and “system” stand out, indicating that at the core of each mode — or even across modes — there is a dominant ideology at work. If, to extend Haider’s argument, the dominant ideology is capitalism tied into a legal and nationalist form of domination, along with the inherent economic domination which capitalism brings, then the racism/capitalism oppression can neatly take a bureaucratic form. In this sense the “domination through knowledge” is primarily a legal knowledge which is either exploited for gain when the lower orders of the bureaucracy are left unaware of their legal abilities, and/or where codification of rules and law are made beyond the reach of the lower orders who are then forced to carry out and perpetuate oppressive practices embedded within the bureaucracy they are a part of under a hegemonic knowledge.

Bureaucracy, Exploitation, and Ostensibly Progressive Values

I will now turn to the issue of performatively progressive acts as manifested in the novel, which are crucial to its setting during a Civil Rights Era timeframe, as Pompey and Lila Mae are endlessly exploited. Examining the history of “equal opportunity,” Frank Dobbin provides a brief overview of implementing inclusive practices in the workplace through bureaucratic means:

Equal opportunity experts argued that formal job descriptions and job requirements, open bidding systems for jobs, and salary classification systems that tied wages to skills and duties could stop discrimination. Those measures had been part of the labor relations portfolio created in the 1930s to prevent line managers from discriminating against union activists. In the 1950s, personnel experts promoted these practices outside the union sector as a system of modern personnel administration. Now they recast the programs again as antidiscrimination measures. . . the bureaucratization of hiring and promotion did change the face of equal opportunity, leaving Americans with an expanded sense of workplace fairness. (Dobbin 102)

Although some programs were implemented in the 1970s and 80s, job openings were not labeled as “equal opportunity,” meaning that “a decade or so later there was nothing to signal that they [corporations] had been a part of compliance strategy” (102). Dobbin frames the effects of these

efforts as merely providing a *sense* of fairness: “Workers *came to think* that they had a right to throw their names in the hat when a job came open, a right to objective performance evaluation, and a right to see job prerequisites in writing” (emphasis mine, 102). With the illusion of fairness, employees will buy into a culture which gives the appearance of reform and equality, offering small and disingenuous tweaks without altering the root issue of a capitalist system.

All of these issues are on display in *The Intuitionist*, particularly as Lila Mae is the first female “colored” elevator inspector, working alongside the first “colored” inspector for the city, Pompey. The two have an adversarial relationship and are pitted against both each other and the white employees in the Department. Lila Mae’s position also earns her animosity from the mechanics in the Department garage: “Lila Mae eases her sedan into the rank gloom of the garage and past the observation window of the mechanics’ office . . . Lila Mae prays she will make it safe past them, be spared the customary frowns and code-nods. Dicty college woman” (Whitehead 18). In a flashback to her Institute exam, she is prodded about the number of “colored” elevator inspectors, and asked “do you know how many are employed as such? Are not working as shoeshine boys? Or maids?” (53). Pompey and Lila Mae are in incredibly rare positions, and this places them outside of any social or cultural circles as a result. Whitehead offers a “story about Pompey that’s true or not true: it doesn’t matter” (24). Pompey is called into the Guild Chair’s office, which is traditionally the signal of a promotion:

Pompey, the first colored elevator inspector in the city, is summoned up to see Holt for the first time, after putting in four years on the streets. The difficulty of all colored “firsts” is well documented or at the very least easily imaginable, and need not be elaborated except to say that Pompey had an exceedingly hard time of things . . . Holt told him he was going to kick him in the ass. Pompey laughed (this executive humor was going to take a little getting used to) and went along with the joke, even after Holt told him to bend over. Which he did. Pompey continued to chortle until Holt kicked him in the left ass cheek with the arrowhead of one of his burgundy wingtips . . . Then Holt told him to leave his office. The next day a small memo appeared on Pompey’s desk informing him of his promotion to Inspector Second Grade. True, Holt didn’t first ask him to shine the shoe. (25)

After the Fanny Briggs elevator failure, Pompey is overheard saying that Lila Mae is “finally getting what’s been coming to her for a long time now” (26). Lila Mae can only speculate on Pompey’s callous attitude towards her, and ruminates on why he resented her:

[She] present[ed] them with a more exotic token, thus diluting their hatred towards him, the hatred that had calcified over time into something he came to cherish and savor as friendship; or were his haughty stares and keen disparagements his attempt at a warning against becoming him, and thus an aspect of racial love? (25-6)

After investigating Pompey as the culprit behind the elevator crash, Lila Mae confronts him and finds Pompey’s feelings towards her stem from his struggles as the “first colored elevator inspector in history” (195):

And you will never know what hell they put me through. You think you have it bad? You have no idea. And it was because I did it first that you’re here now . . . They made shit of what I wanted and made me eat it. You had it easy, snot-nose kid that you are, because of me. (195)

Lila Mae’s reaction is not given, other than that she believes what Pompey told her about doing illegal work for Chancre to earn extra money for his family. It is implied that the trust in Pompey’s story includes the denial of sabotaging the elevator; however, Lila Mae merely notes that the story “jibes with Chancre’s” and “files it away for later” (197). The slow-to-change nature of bureaucracy coupled with the racism inherent to capitalism enables superiors like Holt to freely assault Pompey while simultaneously dividing Pompey and Lila Mae’s potential allyship through rank. It is unclear as to why Pompey was hired in the first place given the prevalent attitudes towards race in the novel, but the idea of “progress” — at least superficially — is apparent in the naming of the Fanny Briggs building as the “times are changing” (12).

Integration in the Department only serves a political purpose, and Pompey and Lila Mae’s conspicuous positions as “outsiders” in the Department leads to attempts at exploitation.

The difficulties of integrating the bureaucratic workplace are described by Waldinger and

Lichter:

Social closure is likely to be most efficient against outsiders whose social standing and position is similar, but not quite equal, to the condition of those insiders that have gained control over some rare, valued resource. Where labor is ethnically segmented, closure is exercised against laterally placed groups, circumscribing opportunities to all but members of the inside group . . . [T]he more that ethnic economic actors are embedded in dense, many-sided relations, the stronger are the mechanisms, and the greater the motivations, for excluding outsiders. (Waldinger and Lichter 88-9)

While Lila Mae and Pompey's circumstances are very much determined by being Othered, they do hold the educational component to place themselves in a lateral position to the rest of the employees at the Department. By no means are Lila Mae and Pompey well off outside of work: Pompey lives in a run-down neighborhood and aspires for his children to escape it, and a white character remarks on Lila Mae's apartment that he "would not move into the neighborhood if you paid him" (Whitehead 30). Even while at school, Lila Mae "lived in the janitor's closet because the Institute for Vertical Transport did not have living space for colored students" (43). The "rare, valued resource" at work is education from the Institute, leverage against a pseudo-progressive bureaucracy which abuses and discriminates against employees of color despite their qualifications. It is unclear if Pompey is an Intuitionist, but Lila Mae's affiliation with the methodology gains her access to Mr. Reed and the Intuitionist House. While she is ultimately used as a means for finding the black box to assist Orville Lever's campaign for Guild Chair, along with advancing the Arbo Elevator Company, Lila Mae nonetheless exists for a moment in a privileged space:

Very little actual research goes on at the House . . . Inspectors and theoreticians of elevators are still social creatures despite the toll their profession exacts on their souls. Every Tuesday, James Fulton (and later, Orville Lever) stood in the downstairs drawing room and lectured on the intricacies of his science. Lectured on the implications of European maintenance deviations on Intuitionism, expounded on the gloom of the shaft and how it does not merely echo the gloom inside every living creature, but duplicates it perfectly. Afterwards there were mint juleps for everyone. (54)

The Intuitionist House, a glorified academic social club, was effectively built out of spite by Edward Diph-Watney as “he felt anything that caused such bellowing and recrimination merited a place to germinate and unfold itself, and hopefully cause more bellowing and recrimination” (53). It is not yet an inclusive space for Intuitionists of color, as Lila Mae is only invited for political means. As Raymond Coombs reveals about the plan for Lila Mae that the Intuitionists and Arbo concocted: “Let one colored in and you’re integrated. Let two in, you got a race war as they try to kiss up to whitey” (249). Lila Mae did not realize she was invited to the house out of political and capitalist convenience, where the planted search for the black box would be assigned to her and monitored to give the Intuitionists an election advantage, and Arbo the future of elevators. The election results are not given in the novel as they do not affect Lila Mae, who breaks from the world of elevator inspectors to complete Fulton’s work out of political and corporate reach.

In terms of superficial progress in Guild politics, the novel is set during an election year for the Elevator Guild with Chancre (the incumbent Empiricist) vying with Lever (an Intuitionist) for the position of Guild Chair. Chancre assigned Lila Mae to the Fanny Briggs building and attempts to use her to his political advantage, weighing the risks of faux progressivism against losing votes from the more prejudiced members of the Guild:

So when word spread that Lila Mae had been assigned the 18-deep elevator stack in the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building (18-deep!), a career-making case for any inspector, few were surprised and whatever ground Chancre lost among the Old Dogs of the Guild was more than compensated for by the goodwill generated by the raise and the new mother-of-pearl jackknife screwdrivers. Lila Mae knew when she got the assignment that it was meant to draw attention from Chancre’s opponent in the race . . . the liberal Orville Lever, who apparently thinks that only Intuitionists are capable of building coalitions, shaking hands with fundamentally different people, etc . . . Chancre’s assistant left a note on her [Lila Mae’s] desk: *Your good service won’t be forgotten after the election.* (emphasis Whitehead 13-4)

Unbeknownst to Lila Mae at this time, Chancre's mob contracts through Johnny Shush ensure that Shush's elevator repair teams are used to fix elevators, though often unsuccessfully, and Pompey is used to either make necessary repairs or alter paperwork to keep the buildings listed as up to code. Pompey is singled out for his race and socioeconomic status, as Shush "can't afford to bribe anyone in the Department" during a federal probe, and Pompey agrees to take whatever money he can get in the interests of moving his family out of their declining neighborhood (194). Pompey is well aware that he is being exploited, and of the risks of his actions, but the opportunity to provide a better life for his family outweighs all else. Revealing the source of his animosity towards Lila Mae, Pompey gives his perspective on working for the Department:

This is a white man's world. They make the rules. You come along, strutting like you own the place. Like they don't own you. But they do. If not Chancre, then Lever. I was the first colored elevator inspector in history. In history! And you will never, ever know what hell they put me through . . . And it was because I did it first that you're here now . . . I was the first colored man to get a Department badge. They made shit of what I wanted and made me eat it. (195)

Pompey experienced the trauma of both immediate violence and the slow violence of abuse from his coworkers over the years, and he deeply resents that Lila Mae is only experiencing slow violence in the Department as opposed to outright hostility. Both characters are fully aware that they are being used for various purposes by white higher-ups; however, where Pompey is willing to benefit from his position for the betterment of his family, Lila Mae sees this as unscrupulous and insists on an objective morality, reminding Pompey that he "took an oath" to enforce the law (194). As the note from Chancre's assistant implies, Lila Mae is prospectively being recruited to follow Pompey's role through bribes, either monetary or promotional. Chancre and the Empiricists are in the pocket of the United Elevator Company, while Lever and the Intuitionists

are in with the Arbo Elevator Company, making both sides – and indeed ideologies – flush with corporate cash and lobbied interests (207-8).

I will now examine the concept of “historical trauma” as it applies in the text:

[M]ass trauma is deliberately and systematically inflicted upon a target population by a subjugating target population . . . [and] continues over an extended period of time . . . creating a universal experience of trauma [throughout the population] . . . resulting in a legacy of physical, psychological, social, and economic disparities that persists across generations. (Sotero 94-5)

Being “colored,” Pompey and Lila Mae have a commonality of historical trauma, and as Lila Mae’s generation enters the workforce, she becomes exposed to the same set of individuals who have abused Pompey during his career. Their reactions to this, however, could not be more different: at the “Funicular Follies” party for the Department, Lila Mae sneaks in as a member of the waitstaff and works completely unnoticed in front of her white coworkers, as “[s]he is the colored help” (Whitehead 153). Pompey, conversely, is absorbed by a horrifically offensive minstrel show, “[h]is mouth is cracked open with laughter. He slaps the table and shakes his head” (155). Pompey’s reaction of amusement is never explained: is he genuinely entertained by taking in the entertainment spectacle of the era as he is expected to by the culture industry, or is he acting the part to fit in and gain favor with the Department? If going along with the show meant future opportunities to break some of the historical trauma that would otherwise be passed along to his children if Pompey couldn’t relocate his family, this is likely the case, although Lila Mae does not see Pompey’s reaction in these terms. Her actions and reactions to events do not typically account for long-term effects, and as a result she frequently seems unaware of what her generation is inheriting in terms of historical trauma, instead focusing on her present circumstances.

Returning to exploitation, even though both Lila Mae and Pompey are outsiders in their workplace and antagonistic for personal reasons, the core issue is economic exploitation under

late capitalism. Lila Mae initially suspects Pompey of sabotaging the Fanny Briggs elevator, speculating that he was used by the Department to “[appease] their skewed sense of harmony to pit their two coloreds against each other. Dogs in a fighting pit” (87). Although this is not the cause of the elevator crash, that it immediately raised Lila Mae’s suspicions of Pompey shows the effectiveness of the type of divisive culture outlined by Haider: Lila Mae suspects that Pompey has been to whatever extent been “compromised” by whiteness, observing that he “won’t drink anything darker than his skin, for fear of becoming darker than he already is. As if his skin were a stain that could worsen, steep and saturate into Hell’s Black” (87). Pompey is indeed pitted against Lila Mae, but not for political reasons or purposes; his grudge is personal and from a place of suffering and humiliation. As the novel’s contextual hints of social progress suggest, Pompey’s rant is not without merit: according to the text, Lila Mae’s uniqueness is that she is the first “colored” female elevator inspector *who is employed as such*, with the implication is that she is not the first female inspector, nor the first female of color to pass her exams and become an inspector (53). Pompey bears the physical wounds of faux-progressivism from being kicked before his promotion along with years of unspecified “hell;” on the contrary, Lila Mae’s three years appear to have been relatively uneventful, serving to feed the animosity between the two characters. It is not simply enough that Lila Mae and Pompey are placed in opposition to white characters; they are subdivided perhaps just as much by their differing forms of trauma and financial standing, along with how each perceives the other’s relationships with the white characters (Lila Mae and the law, Pompey and the mob). Above all else, Lila Mae and Pompey’s exploitations are economic, with an elevator company benefiting off their actions: Pompey with the smaller inspection clearances, and Lila Mae with the macro element of Fulton’s research and the black box. Since Lila Mae does not continue working for the Department at the end of the novel, she has presumably received payment for delivering the not-quite-perfect elevator

concepts to buy time to finish her work. Even though Lila Mae and Pompey know they are at the mercy of various payrolls with nefarious purposes, their personal circumstances under late capitalism necessitate taking the money, reflecting their shared economic exploitation. The Department, a government entity, is effectively controlled by private interests of the elevator companies through ideological influence. They know Pompey needs money, and know that Lila Mae can get likely get access to information about Fulton's journals, having the Intuitionist house prompt her to investigate, all the while providing "protection" and amenities to covertly pry information from her, none more blatant than Arbo's plant of Raymond Coombs as the working-class "Natchez" to nudge Lila Mae along.

"Passing" and Profit

The Intuitionist raises many questions about the notion of "passing," particularly as it relates to the characters Fulton and "Natchez"/Raymond Coombs. While the majority of characters are split between the text's labels of "colored" and white, Fulton and Coombs present ambiguities – albeit in extremely different ways – which are capitalized upon by the Arbo Elevator Company for technological dominance. More broadly speaking, these characters invite questions about race and capitalism which, although not the focus of this dissertation, is necessary to examine as it occurs within *The Intuitionist*.

While staying in the ostensible protection of the Intuitionist House, Lila Mae is uncomfortable with her position as a guest against the porter Natchez, Arbo's disguised "special projects" man Raymond Coombs: "She doesn't take to it, being waited on by colored people. This is wrong" (Whitehead 49). Natchez is initially presented as the nephew filling in for the regular porter, but this is revealed to be a disguise as a "dumb country boy," in Coombs's terms, who is implied to be white yet sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement through his short interaction with Lila Mae at the conclusion of the novel:

Colored people think two of our presidents were colored. We make noises about it, but nothing ever comes of it. The rank and file industry won't believe, and those who know care more about [Fulton's] last inventions. His color doesn't matter once it gets to that level. The level of commerce. They can put Fulton into one of those colored history calendars if they want – it doesn't change the fact that there's money to be made from his invention. (Whitehead 250)

Coombs's self-exclusion from the "colored" identity, but inclusion of "we" in terms of those wanting to recognize presidents of color, along with his picture of the "famous reverend . . . who is so loud down South," creates a perplexing character (248). He attempts to unsettle Lila Mae by referencing her relationship with Pompey, stating that she was predictable in that when an organization lets "one colored in and you're integrated. Let two in, you got a race war as they try to kiss up to whitey" (249). Coombs's entire demeanor, Lila Mae notes, has altered to "finishing-school diction," his voice "an octave or two higher," and his clothes "corporate creation as opposed to the coarse fabrics of the man's former disguise. Those struggling working-man stitches" (247-9). Coombs is somehow able to "reverse-pass," fooling Lila Mae successfully throughout her investigation, though it is unclear if he employs some form of blackface in his disguise. If he does, it is certainly not like the exaggerated stereotypes seen at the Funicular Follies, and subtle enough for him to persuade Lila Mae that "Natchez" may be the long-lost son of the passing Fulton.

Natchez produces old photographs of Fulton to plant this idea, and Lila Mae sees Fulton as white, with the single exception of his mother's trait:

In the picture, two colored women and one white man stand under slanting sunlight on the porch of an old wooden house . . . His black hair is hacked into a bowl cut, jagged and raw above his eyes. In the next picture, and the next, Lila Mae cannot see his eyes at all. He has found his trademark brown trilby, and the brim's veil of shadow hides his mother's eyes. He is surrounded by white men in their first suits, which are loose and shy at the wrists, just short of dignified, almost there . . . He is welcome in both [pictures], no intruder, accepted by his companions. But in the school picture she cannot see his eyes. (136-7)

Reflecting on Fulton's ability to pass, Lila Mae wonders about his public life:

What did Fulton do when [he and his wife] acted white? Talk about ‘the colored problem’ and how it is our duty to help the primitive race get in step with white civilization. Out of darkest Africa. Or did he remain silent, smile politely at their darkie jokes. Tell a few of his own. (139)

Both scenarios that Lila Mae plays out reveal a very dim view of her idol, despite her realization mere pages earlier that Fulton was full of self-hatred *for his ability to pass*, and that the crux of Intuitionism is “[c]ommunication with what is not-you” (241). While this plays out quite literally with elevator inspection techniques and communication between human and nonhuman objects, the implication is that the second elevation may in some unspecified way bridge a racial gap. Returning to generational differences, however, had Fulton not been allowed to develop Intuitionism out of the Institute by passing, his work would not be studied, so whatever pessimism Lila Mae holds against Fulton does not account for his suffering, much as Lila Mae follows behind Pompey’s torments.

Coombs’s remark about Fulton that, “[h]is color doesn’t matter once it gets to that level. The level of commerce,” encapsulates the macro-level contrast to my discussion of Lila Mae and Pompey’s relative micro-exploitation (250). While they are targeted to serve the day-to-day purposes of Arbo and United because of their race, Fulton is conversely exploitable regardless of race because of his monetary potential. Pompey and Lila Mae can perform errands affordably – Pompey for money, Lila Mae out of a sense of justice – while Lila Mae will pay off by delivering Fulton’s journals and therefore money on the “level of commerce.” Returning briefly to Haider’s critique, rooted in black revolutionary theory, he reference’s Malcolm X’s comments regarding “The Harlem ‘Hate-Gang’ Scare” in 1964. During the open question and answer period, Malcolm X states, “[i]t’s impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism. You can’t have capitalism without racism” (X 69). This is due in part to racial oppression being entangled with “legal segregation [and] also with the organization of urban

space, hierarchies of political representation, the violence of the repressive state apparatus, and economic exclusion and marginalization” which “the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act” failed to restructure (Haider 17). Revolutionary technology like Fulton’s, when placed in the hands of capitalists such as those running the major elevator companies, will only serve to broaden inequality as the wealthy and white-populated parts of major cities can afford to build upwards, raising property values, while neighborhoods like Pompey’s continue to deteriorate, even if Fulton is celebrated in a “colored history calendar,” as Coombs points out. Fulton’s work would not open the floodgates of institutional reform; rather, recognizing his background would be, at best, a performative gesture of progress while his work benefitted the industry for free.

Conclusion

Although not a primarily office-based novel in the vein of the other works in this dissertation, *The Intuitionist* foregrounds the intersection of race and capitalism which is absent in the other texts. The same interlocking core concepts are at work throughout, but it is impossible to properly speak of capitalism without speaking of racism, and future scholarship on bureaucratic and workplace novels should certainly address systems of oppression related to other marginalized communities in a manner which promotes a political unity rather than a system of division. Lila Mae’s ability to work towards self-fulfillment is one of few examples in this dissertation of a character who escapes the pressures of late capitalism, instead working only for herself at an unhurried pace on a project she is passionate about. Although this is complicated through the notion of authorship, she is no longer an agent of bureaucracy and an extension of the state’s legal apparatus, suffering from the slow violence of her workplace and the politics around it. Lila Mae’s experience, contrasted with Pompey, is shortsighted and does not account for historical trauma, and in particular, Pompey’s experience in the Department, causing the two

employees of color to develop a mutual disdain for each other. The mystery of Elevator Number 11 in the Fanny Briggs building remains unresolved, although Lila Mae concludes that there is no mystery: Number 11 experienced a rare “catastrophic accident” despite passing all safety checks and Lila Mae’s inspection. She recalls that “[e]ven Fulton stayed away from the horror of the catastrophic accident: even in explicating the unbelievable he never dared broach the unknowable. Lila Mae thinks: out of fear” (Whitehead 229). Despite Fulton’s fears, Lila Mae pushes forward with the black box project, ready to accept the unknown and bring about radical change for the betterment of all.

CHAPTER V: THEN WE CAME TO THE END

Outline

This chapter starts with **Invoking the Unspeakable**, a discussion continuing from my chapter on *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* and Naomi Mandel's reaction to the "unspeakable" in trauma theory. The next section, **The Bureaucratic Detective**, examines the role of bureaucracy within the ad agency and the paranoia it creates among employees who have heard rumors about compliance enforcement with office furniture. **Labor, or Lack Thereof** examines the ways in which employees actively avoid work, and **Perpetuating the Culture Industry** looks at the core ad campaign on breast cancer which occupies much of the employees' time during the novel. The segment on **Power Dynamics** centers on Joe Pope, an employee occupying a liminal position between rank-and-file and management, and **Carl's Self-Reliance** addresses the narrative following Carl's decline and escape from the office. **The Emerson-Marx Connection** draws together the novel's intertextuality with Emerson and Emerson's relation to Marx's work, followed by **"This Trauma Could Have Been an Email"** – a discussion of trauma theory as it applies to this novel – and finally **Tom's Epiphany**, an analysis of the intersection of Emerson, trauma, and the culture industry present in the aftermath of Tom's workplace shooting.

Introduction

Then We Came to the End centers around a core group of office workers in an advertising agency who try to do as little work as possible, while paradoxically living every moment in fear of layoffs and losing their cushy incomes. As they are fired one by one, their reactions vary greatly: some are in denial, some disappear quietly, and others take varying forms of revenge, culminating in an unhinged employee shooting up the office with blood-red paintballs, terrorizing the staff. Various forms of slow violence and trauma are on display, along with

pressures of late capitalism and the culture industry to maintain standards of living which employees feel entitled to. No tangible product is produced; rather, the ad agency functions as an arm of the culture industry to cultivate interest in products or services, targeting specific audiences with images and slogans which *lead to*, but *are not themselves*, commodities. Divisions between management and rank-and-file workers are strong, leading to conflicts and ostracization of rank-and-file who aspire to be management. Mental health crises are generally ignored, or simply medicated, to ensure workers continue to perform and produce content for the agency. Elements of bureaucracy are at work, and while not the primary function of this office, the space is nonetheless affected by bureaucratic processes, such as the office inventory manager whose pursuit of matching the correct furniture with the correct cubicle drives one employee to extreme paranoia. This office is an example of the so-called “efficient” bureaucracy, where documentation is mostly eschewed and employees are motivated by profit-based incentives, with a tradeoff of high turnover. The overall point of this office is still to generate *information* in the form of *culture*, through the input of metrics and output of advertising to targeted audiences. The information is packaged to be as appealing as possible and persuade the audiences to engage with a product or service; this stumbles in the novel’s bizarre breast cancer campaign, where the requested goal to make patients laugh.

While most, if not all characters experience trauma from a variety of sources, Carl Garbedian is the most important character to this analysis as he suffers from a mental breakdown and suicide attempt in the middle of the novel. Carl’s breakdown is due to feelings of inferiority and a lack of purpose, recognizing his role in the culture industry as a producer of spectacle with a breast cancer campaign compared to his wife’s role as an oncologist. If we can view Carl as the subdued and conscientious superego of the novel, his counterpart Tom Mota is its raging Id, blasting obnoxious office-wide emails, engaging in drunken and destructive behavior, justifying

this as living in an Emersonian mode of authenticity. For all of his antagonisms, however, Tom manages to convince Carl that his true calling is not in advertising but in landscaping, which provides Carl a successful escape from an office-bound career. Although the entire workplace suffers a collective trauma from Tom's office shooting, albeit with non-lethal red paintballs, Carl's narrative thread provides the most detailed example of physical and psychological damage from late capitalism and the office, which is why he is prominently featured in this chapter.

Emerson is woven throughout the text, primarily in Tom's bizarre attempts to inspire his coworkers about the power of the individual. While Emerson is otherwise quite outside my focus in this dissertation, there is a connection with Marx which has not been well explored in existing scholarship. I will not be doing so to enter the field of "transcendental materialism," "plac[ing] the distinction between nature and culture within nature itself . . . [wherein c]ulture is the immanent transcending of nature in its givenness;" rather, the connection is one of views on farming technology and displacement of the independent farmer (Lynch 137-8). The link between Emerson and Marx ties in with Carl's landscaping ambitions and sense of purpose he finds outside the corporate world, encouraged by Tom to work in the natural world and own the means of production for himself.

Invoking the Unspeakable: September 11th and Conspicuous Absence

Building on Naomi Mandel's argument on the "unspeakable," I will now examine the novel's use of traumatic absence. Ferris creates an "unspeakable" moment near the end of the novel, omitting any mention of September 11th while circumscribing the event which remains conspicuously absent from the text. After most of the core group is laid off, Ferris concludes the chapter with the absence:

In the last week of August 2001, and in the first ten days of that September, there were more layoffs than in all the months preceding them. But by the grace of god, the rest of us

hang on, hating each other more than we ever thought possible. Then we came to the end of another bright and tranquil summer (Ferris 357)

The next chapter begins in “the summer of 2006,” following Benny at his new workplace. The only mention of events related to September 11th is a brief reference to Tom’s absence at the end of the novel, as explained by Carl:

He kept talking about wanting to join up — after all that had happened, you know. He just couldn’t get it out of his head . . . He said it was the best decision he ever made” (380). Carl adds that Tom believed in “fighting for his country” which, as Janine mentions, Tom “called this country the best republic that ever began to fade (380-1)

It is finally revealed that Tom “had been killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan,” to which Janine remarks, “How could he have enjoyed such things?” (381). Ferris engages in the sort of “unspeakability” of September 11th as critiqued in an earlier chapter by Mandel. *Then We Came to the End* is not a book about September 11th, but draws considerable attention to the event while simultaneously remaining silent about it. The event is a clear schism in the narrative, left without explanation. Ferris appears content with letting cultural memory fill the gap in a book published six years later; however, trauma theory notoriously encounters what Dori Laub describes as “the impossibility of telling:”

[S]ilence about the truth commonly prevails. Many of the [Holocaust] survivors interviewed at the Fortunoff Video Archive realize that they have only begun the long process of witnessing now — forty years after the event. Some have hardly spoken of it, but even those who have talked incessantly, feel that they managed to say very little that was heard . . . Moreover, survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory, that is, of a forcibly imposed “external evil,” which causes an endless struggle with and over a delusion. The “not telling” of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny . . . The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events. (Laub 64)

Relying on cultural memory, Ferris entrusts readers with inserting their own version of events, perhaps even avoiding the memory entirely, which falls into the problem of what Christopher Browning found in research for *Ordinary Men*:

As with any use of multiple sources, the many accounts and perspectives had to be sifted and weighed. The reliability of each witness had to be assessed. Much of the testimony had to be partially or totally dismissed in favor of conflicting testimony that was accepted . . . Other historians looking at the same materials would retell these events in somewhat different ways. (Browning xviii-xix)

Cultural memory may be incongruous with individual experience, as the meta-discourse of a “unifying” event smooths over or ignores conflict. Cultural memory can change or diminish over time, making the novel’s omission of what it implies to be a phenomenal shift in the narrative into a major structural flaw.

Returning to Wallace for comparison, the nonfiction piece “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” entirely omits the phrase “September 11th” while discussing the event itself, as the declared subject is listed as “obvious.” Rather than omit the trauma and make it unspeakable, however, Wallace offers the piece as testimony of “the Horror” and concludes with acknowledging conflicting ideological views of the US:

I’m trying, rather, to explain how some part of the horror of the Horror was knowing, deep in my heart, that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my America and F—’s, and poor old loathsome Duane’s, that it was these ladies” (“Mrs. Thompson’s” 140)

Ferris’ exclusion of September 11th, while simultaneously pointing directly at it through its absence, does not allow for readers to see the impact of the event on the novel’s characters. Other than Tom Mota’s death, it appears to have impacted no one, in a phenomenally anticlimactic manner. This raises the possibility that, much like with Tom Mota’s paintball rampage, there was perhaps no trauma and everyone enjoyed a day off from work. On the other hand, as Cathy Caruth discusses regarding Freud’s theory of trauma and nightmares, the narrative break may be a form of “awakening” leading into a sort of game:

What causes trauma, then, is an encounter that is not directly perceived as a threat to the life of the organism but that occurs, rather, as a break in the mind’s experience of time . . . The breach in the mind — the psyche’s awareness of the threat to life — is not caused by a direct threat or injury, but by fright, the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus

that comes too quickly. It is not the direct perception of danger, that is, that constitutes the threat for the psyche, but the fact that danger is recognized as such one moment too late . . . It is the surprise of waking that repeats the unexpectedness of trauma. (Caruth 5-6)

Discussing Freud's example of a child repeatedly tossing and retrieving a spool (*fort/da*), playing out his mother's departures and returns in the form of a game, Caruth describes the "drive for life" seen in the retrieval of the spool as "a language of departure, that is, that does not repeat the unconscious origin of life as death, but creates a history by precisely departing toward survival" (9). In addition, "The language of the life drive does not simply point backward, that is, but bears witness to the past by pointing to the future" (9-10). While Caruth's example of Freud and their own following case study of Khalil are limited to specific individuals rather than groups, the overarching concept of creating a "history of survival" is still applicable to a collective narrative about trauma (17).

Jansen's argument on the "refusal of 9/11 representations" – while it does not particularly engage with the issues discussed in my previous chapter by N. Mandel (namely that a privileging of "unspeakability" is a solipsistic practice of moral superiority when talking *about* trauma) – examines the tension between absence of representability and the imperative to represent. Jansen runs the novel through a narratological discussion of the "we" narrative, moving between voices critical of reductive narratives (DeLillo) and the question that "authors *could* represent what had happened. But should they have?" (emphasis Jansen 120). Jansen does "not disagree with DeLillo" regarding the importance of individual stories, but remains somewhat ambivalent about the effectiveness of Ferris' narration, praising its cleverness in addressing representation while admitting that it also creates problems of representation (128). Jansen argues that "the 'we' narrative and the absence of 9/11 . . . tacitly expresses an argument: that for whatever we are, this is something we cannot wrap our heads around, cannot put into words, cannot do justice" (127).

In incorporating both unspeakability and the need for individual representation, Jansen's praise of the "we" remains uncertain by concluding that it "both flattens those individual stories, highlights who and who does not get to speak, and, ultimately, suggests a kind of cubicle-dwelling community that retreats into nostalgia — and into complacency and complicity" (128). While the conclusion here errs on the side of critical, drawing attention to the problems with the novel's representation of 9/11, Jansen does not effectively commit to the broader question of to *what extent* the absence of directly addressing 9/11 causes a critical issue. Briefly citing Simpson, Jansen perhaps comes closest to this issue in describing "an emptiness to be filled by potentially any motive or explanation" (119). Ferris' refusal of representation therefore relies on a culturally constructed narrative to set the tone of his conclusion, allowing any prevailing ideology to "tamper" with witnessing. Wallace's in-the-moment narrative immediately begins to question ideological motives while simultaneously recognizing individual accounts of the same event, providing a representation while admitting that it may not necessarily be the "right" one. Ferris' absence of and subsequent refusal to acknowledge 9/11 outright, other than a brief reference to Tom's motive for joining the military regarding "all that had happened," places 9/11 in the privileged realm of the "unspeakable," creating an issue of the novel's moral status either intentionally or unintentionally by setting a limit on what is speakable (Ferris 380).

The Bureaucratic Detective

This section addresses the intersection of bureaucracy, in the form of "the bureaucrat," with the office. The chair saga recurs throughout the text with characters worrying about the office coordinator discovering mismatched serial numbers on cubicle furniture, originating with Chris Yop's panic over possessing Ernie Kessler's chair, along with some of Tom's office furniture. The employees use furniture to fixate on a smaller worry to keep others repressed, such as when Marcia swaps her chair, citing fear of the unknown. Chris is dismissive of the office

coordinator, and says that he “tried to tap into something human and feeling in her. But it’s not working. She ain’t nothin’ but a bureaucrat” (Ferris 33). Even after he’s fired, Chris continues to use the office as a resource, printing off resumés and asking Marcia to proofread them, and still obsessing over the last work project he was given: “‘The sick and twisted thing,’ Yop confessed, ‘is that I *want* to work. Can you believe that? I *want* to work. Isn’t that sick? You understand what I’m saying here, Karen? I’ve just been terminated, and inside my head I’m still working’” (105). Chris pops in and out of the narrative, using office supplies and demanding to know why he hasn’t been told of changes to the project. His final act is to dismantle Tom’s chair while dressed in a suit, smuggling the parts out of the building, and hurling them into Lake Michigan. In turn, after her firing, Marcia takes Chris’s chair (formerly Ernie’s) to do the same. The only significant recourse to revenge in the office is to spite “the bureaucrat” who can claim possession of what the workers come to see as their own, aside from what the office calls “useless shit” that everyone accumulates in their cubicles. Marcia reflects on the state of everyone’s concerns as she packs up her belongings:

And do you remember how worked up I was over having Tom Mota’s chair, with the wrong serial numbers? You guys told me to go in and replace Tom’s chair with Yop’s chair, that used to be Ernie’s chair, remember? Because it would be better to be caught with Ernie’s chair than to be caught with Tom’s . . . Do you realize how insane we’ve all become? (332)

When faced with the prospect of layoffs, the office workers attempted to exert control over something seemingly manageable rather than confront financial insecurity and job performance. No one feels that their performance is lacking, hence the obsession with minor rule infractions. At no point in time is the penalty for swapping office furniture revealed, but the fear of being caught — and no one is caught — creates an atmosphere of extreme paranoia. Dismantling the chairs is a symbolic act against the system, targeted at something which does not reflect personal failings. Being fired for moving some chairs around is, while petty, a preferable alternative to

introspection. Forcing “the bureaucrat” to account for missing furniture is a realistic goal and distraction from existential concerns, displacing fear of the unknown with that of the known. Janet recognizes this as one of the categories of *idée fixes*, wherein persons experience “fragments or feelings that are tangentially linked to the event but not explicitly related to it, such as inexplicable phobias, repeated nightmares, fantasies, or hallucinations” (Bond and Craps 22). The link for Marcia and Chris is the paranoia and obsession related to the office manager, tangential in the sense that they fear being fired for the office furniture swaps during a period of mass layoffs unrelated to furniture. Chris and Lynn are the only employees who actually encounter the office manager, and Chris’s behavior towards the manager appears to be the reason Lynn dismisses him, as revealed in Chris’s story:

The office coordinator goes in first. I follow her in and close the door. “Okay,” says Lynn. And you know how she can lean forward at her desk and look at you like she’s about to carve your skull out with her laser eyes? She says, “Now what’s going on?” The office coordinator comes right out of the gate — first, I stole Tom’s [bookshelves]. “Where’s the proof?” I cry out. I mean she’s not letting me talk . . . Then she tells Lynn I’ve been harassing her. Me harassing her! I can’t believe my ears. But what she doesn’t say a thing about, not one word about — she says *not one word* about the chair. The whole point is the chair! . . . She says, “What chair?” . . . And I say, “YOU KNOW GODDAMN WELL WHAT CHAIR! She knows what chair, Lynn! She tried to take my chair away from me. My *legitimate* chair.” (emphasis Ferris 40-1)

After Lynn tells Chris that he’s been laid off, Chris continues to insist that the reason is because of the chair, rather than recognize his behavior towards the office manager, particularly in front of Lynn. In contrast, Marcia takes her firing as a relief since she will no longer have to worry about the uncertainty of layoffs. Reflecting on her paranoia, Marcia tells her coworkers that she will not have to live in fear of appearing lazy: “I was always too worried someone might come along and see me and think I should be working and not at the coffee bar enjoying a cup of coffee. I can enjoy coffee again” (331). As usual, however, the narrator speaks on behalf of the office: “[n]ot enjoying your coffee at the coffee bar was far better than no coffee bar at all.

Twenty minutes earlier, Marcia herself would have said the same thing . . . Soon we would lose sight of her completely. It was tough to behold, but there she was — no longer one of us” (331). The office accepts living in perpetual fear as a natural state, and the incredulity towards Marcia’s relief reflects the self-sustaining nature of late capitalism. Rather than accept the reality of layoffs and economic insecurity, the workers continue to distract themselves with inconsequential details of the workplace as though they are immune to firings. There will *always* be jobs, and there will *always* be income, the workers are convinced, particularly as they work in advertising. The culture industry, which the advertising agency exclusively serves and propels, works in tandem with late capitalism, perpetually modifying itself to continue the same underlying economic system while offering cosmetic shifts designed to appeal to current consumer tastes. The basic form of the economy remains unaffected; merely the types of capital and labor have advanced with technology.¹⁸ So long as the employees can look busy with inter-office emails and occasionally doodle on a Wacom tablet or come up with a catchy slogan, the constant gossip and antics stave off thoughts of a dwindling client base and economic slowdown.

Labor, or Lack Thereof

At this point I will address the labor which occurs in the text. The work itself, as Ferris depicts it, is often performative with the occasional production of tangible product. The narrator details at length the types of activities that consume a day:

We opened a new Quark document, or took out our pencils. Every once in a while a nicely sharpened pencil would crack on the page upon impact and we’d have to go in search of the one electric pencil sharpener. That was annoying. Back in our chairs we

¹⁸ See Wood’s *The Origin of Capitalism*: “Above all, it is a system in which the bulk of society’s work is done by propertyless labourers who are obligated to sell their labour-power in exchange for a wage in order to gain access to the means of life and of labour itself” (Wood 3).

drummed the eraser between our teeth. If a stray paper clip happened to be lying around we were likely to bend it out of shape . . . When we returned to our computer screens, we erased whatever false starts we found there, suddenly embarrassed by them. We had the feeling that our bad ideas were probably worse than the bad ideas of others. Those of us who worked on sketch pads were engaged by that point in the great unsung pastime of American corporate life, the wadded paper toss. This, more than anything, was what “billable hour” implied. It was always annoying when an eyelid started to twitch . . . Suddenly a blinding flash of the obvious would strike, and a flurry of keyboard noise filtered out into the hall . . . That was all we needed, one little insight . . . Inevitably when we reached that point, we stopped to use the restroom. (Ferris 119-120)

The majority of the novel is filled with everything *but* work. This passage is the most sustained description of what everyone does when engaged with a project, which is to say, not much work actually takes place. The narrator admits early on in the novel that avoiding work on ad campaigns is lucrative, and that the lack of work punishes the public:

Some of us loved killing an hour of the company’s time and others felt guilty for it afterwards. But whatever your personal feelings on the matter, you still had to account for the hour, so you billed it to a client. By the end of the fiscal year, our clients had paid us a substantial amount of money to sit around and bullshit, expenses they then passed on to you, the consumer. (16)

The most egregious avoidance of work is detailed in Benny’s challenge to himself, where he “wanted to see if I could go the entire day without touching my mouse or keyboard” (52). Benny enlists the security guard Roland under the pretense of teaching him Photoshop, asking Roland to select stock photos that would go well with the current ad campaign. This is conveyed as a positive experience for both of them, in that Benny avoids work entirely, and Roland doesn’t have to walk around the building by himself for hours. Benny only “loses” when, at the end of the day, he uses his computer for a non-work task and checks his fantasy baseball team. Only when forced to participate in the “fire alarm” events is there any substantial work done by the employees, or at the very least, they are forced to stay at the office for long hours. The narrator admits that their work is primarily appearance-based, declaring that “[l]ooking busy was essential to our feeling vital to the agency, to mention nothing of being perceived as such by the

partners, who would conclude by our labors that it was impossible to lay us off” (175). It is not that work gives a sense of satisfaction and value; rather, it is the performative aspect of work which sustains them. So long as Benny can take credit for Roland’s labor, he will feel accomplished in his exploitative act.

Perpetuating the Culture Industry

To better understand the role of the culture industry in the text, this section explores the main ad campaign which the workers are asked to pitch. The primary narrative arc is that of a pro bono campaign for breast cancer. The goal of the campaign, however, is a source of confusion, and as it is not a paid project the incentives for merely looking busy are much higher than usual. Joe attempts to explain the shifting project goals to the staff, which proves difficult as there is nothing which needs to be sold:

“What the client wants from us now is an ad specifically targeted to the person diagnosed with breast cancer. We’re no longer reaching out to the potential donor with a request for money. We’re talking directly to the sick person. And our objective,” he said, “is to make them laugh . . . come up with an ad . . . that makes the cancer patient laugh. It’s that simple.”

. . .

“Okay, if we’re selling something, we’re selling comfort and hope to the cancer patient through the power of laughter . . . We have no product. We have no features or benefits, we have no call-to-action, we have no competition in the marketplace. We also have no guidelines on design, format, color, type styles, images, or copy.” (Ferris 175-6)

The difficulty of such an absurd campaign is compounded by the sense of power and purpose the workers have in selling products. As everyone scrambles to figure out what is funny about breast cancer, only Jim Jackers manages to come through, even though he is regarded as one of the worst people to pitch concepts and is fired a few weeks after presenting his successful concepts. The narrator explains the workers’ arrogance about their profession:

A good deal of our self-esteem was predicated on the belief that we were good marketers, that we understood what made the world tick — that in fact, we *told* the world how to tick. We got it, we got it better than others, we got it so well we could teach it to them. Using a wide variety of media, we could demonstrate for our fellow

Americans their anxieties, desires, insufficiencies, and frustrations — and how to assuage them all. We informed you in six seconds that you needed something you didn't know you lacked. We made you want anything that anyone willing to pay us wanted you to want. We were hired guns of the human soul. We pulled the strings on the people across the land and by god they got to their feet and they danced for us. (emphasis Ferris 234)

The employees' attitudes are the epitome of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the culture industry:

The most intimate reactions of human beings have become so entirely reified, even to themselves, that the idea of anything peculiar to them survives only in extreme abstraction . . . That is the triumph of advertising in the culture industry: the compulsive imitation by consumers of cultural commodities which, at the same time, they recognize as false. (Horkheimer and Adorno 136)

The purpose of advertising is summed up quite succinctly in Ferris' passage, and Horkheimer and Adorno examine the psychology of advertising to account for its insidiousness through a self-perpetuating cycle wherein consumers are conditioned to demand what they identify as false. Product placement, for example, imprints the product on the consumer's mind by becoming part of a suggested reality, such as in film or television, for which the consumer cannot entirely distinguish from daily life with its own proliferation of advertising. The more consumers accept this falsehood, the more they will be presented with it. Furthering the argument, Horkheimer and Adorno state that advertising "becomes simply the art with which Goebbels presciently equated it, *l'art pour l'art*, advertising for advertising's sake, the pure representation of social power" (emphasis Horkheimer and Adorno 132). The public is so successfully taken in by the culture industry and inundated by advertising that ads no longer need to persuade, but merely remind with a symbol, a product name, or even just the company's name. This is what makes the novel's breast cancer campaign so difficult: the lack of any prior referent. The notion of "awareness" is not the purpose, nor is there even a recognizable sponsor, much to the employees' frustrations. The office begins to suspect that their manager Lynn, who

is rumored and eventually confirmed to have breast cancer, invented the project perhaps for herself. The motives are implied but never revealed, and the campaign's end result is making Lynn smile while she recovers from surgery. Each of Jim's ads are pastiches of existing famous ad campaigns, resulting in a self-referential celebration of the industry itself. Jim's products therefore are not entirely of his own labor, and contribute to the endpoint of "advertising for advertising's sake," which marks the beginning of the end of the agency.

Power Dynamics: With Us or Against Us

In this section, I discuss the divisions between management and rank-and-file employees, and how this creates ostracization within the office. Joe Pope is regarded with suspicion because of his role at the agency, coming in somewhere between rank-and-file and management. Given Joe's two recent promotions, his simple questions to the employees are met with scrutiny:

The thing was, his question — 'How are you all doing with the cold sore spots?' — didn't seem a simple question in search of a simple answer. So soon after his promotion, it seemed more like a shrewd, highly evolved assertion of his new entitlement. We didn't think it was actual concern or curiosity for how we were progressing on the cold sore spot so much as a pretense to prod our asses. (Ferris 93)

Joe's question is due to his own difficulty in finding an appropriate pitch, but "some of us continued to suspect him, however, and as the fine points faded, on balance the episode probably didn't go in his favor" (94). This feeling intensifies when Joe and Genevieve present their campaign, and "[t]he fucker *nailed* it" (emphasis Ferris 95). It is after the successful pitch that Tom scrawls the slur "fag" on Joe's office wall, but at the time, "we had no choice to conclude that Joe, in search of some local attention, had put it up there himself" (96). Maxey speaks to the issue of a "we" narrator against Joe Pope's use of the pronoun in a position of power:

The novel's destabilized, floating narrative voice indicates a superficially uniform and inclusive — but actually highly unsettling and excluding — corporate culture. Through the dynamics of "us" versus "them," "they" — the senior management and real decision-makers, especially the mysterious figure of Lynn Mason, a partner in the firm — are left even more vague than Ferris' shifting "we." This lack of knowledge about the higher

echelons of the firm reflects the vulnerability of junior staff facing a perilous future . . . When Joe Pope comments that Lynn and he are “not talking personal matters [...] We’re talking about ways to keep this place from going under” (251), Joe’s “we” is distinguished from that of the petty, tale-telling faction represented by the junior staff — that is, the small team of copywriters, not laid off immediately, who comprise the heart of the collective narrator. (Maxey 210)

The power relations between competing “we” collectives firmly places Joe in the reach of the murky upper tiers of corporate structure, justifying the workers’ incredulity toward Joe in terms of his loyalties. While this distrust unfairly spills over into presumptions about Joe vandalizing his own office, it nonetheless underscores the divisions between rank-and-file and management. Unlike *The Pale King*’s DeWitt Glendenning, there is no admiration or friendliness between the two sides, and Joe’s friendliness with Lynn reinforces his alignment with management.

Relationships within (and in the case of Carl, outside of) work are frequently contentious, either due to annoyance or jealousy over position title and rank. In the office, Karen and Larry are at odds over titles:

Karen and Larry didn’t get on because Larry was an Art Director and Karen a Senior Art Director and titles meant everything. Every AD wanted to be a SAD. If you were a SAD you had your eyes on becoming an Acker. Acker was our phonetic translation of Associate Creative Director. Ackers wanted to be Creetors (Creative Directors), and every Creetor envied the Eveeps. You could either be a Creveep (Creative Executive Vice President) or an Ackveep (Account Services Executive Vice President), but both species hoped equally to be invited one day into partnership . . . The point was we took this shit very seriously . . . We had one thing still going for us: the prospect of a promotion. (Ferris 110)

The narrator lists the lack of any meaningful perks to come with a promotion other than title, declaring it “a cheap shrewd device concocted by management to keep us from mutiny” (110). Management’s distribution of titles ensures a divided worker base, not merely placating the office but also serving to make workers subdivide themselves despite knowing titles are effectively meaningless. This is a remarkably effective strategy to discourage organization and

unified action against management, and more subversive than the narrator realizes, allowing management to expend minimal effort to keep an obedient workforce.¹⁹

Carl's Self-Reliance?

The key narrative arc in this novel is that of Carl. It is the most optimistic arc, with Ferris showing a character who can escape the high pressure office environment and pursue a career he finds meaningful. Initially, however, Carl is miserable, and experiences a deep jealousy of his wife's work as an oncologist:

The thing he [Carl] really hated, which he would never admit to her, was how he felt the lesser of the two of them for having no obligation that could compare with hers, which he might use to preempt *her*. She had people calling about patients who were dying. Let's face it, there was zero chance one of us would call Carl with a question of mortal uncertainty . . . That made Carl feel that his wife's job was more meaningful than his own; and, because of his particular way of thinking at the time, that *she* was therefore more meaningful. (emphasis Ferris 60)

Carl's feelings of worthlessness lead him to an eventual breakdown, and after stealing pills from Janine's desk for some time, an overdose on psychiatric medication resulting in "toxic poisoning." Even after his recovery and starting his own medication, "[n]one of us could say we had noticed much of a change" (149). Even after medication, Carl's "life still seemed empty, at least when he compared it to his wife's" (306). For as much as the office suffers mentally, medicating the staff appears to be the only fix as there is no mention of psychotherapy in the text. Carl's suffering falls into Gorz's critique of "occupational culture" and the issues raised about worker value. Starting from the assertion that "[w]orking is not just the creation of

¹⁹ See Haraway, particularly her discussion of Sandoval and King, for an analogous issue of difficulties in forming a cohesive group identity based around – among other issues – class within a neoliberal ideology of so-called "identity politics."

economic wealth; it is also always a means of *self*-creation,” Gorz asks about the relationship of work to life and how work is “lived” (emphasis Gorz 80). The primary problem of work for Gorz, to return to the discussion in the chapter on *The Pale King*, is that “[t]he intrinsic interest of a job does not guarantee its being meaningful, just as its humanization does not guarantee the humanization of the ultimate objective it serves” (emphasis Gorz 83). Discussing the differences between maintenance workers and craftworkers, particularly in their relationship to controlling products and/or machines, Gorz argues:

[C]linging in the name of a purely ideological, formal work ethic to the view that work is our source of personal identity and social integration, amounts to elevating identification with a specialized *function* to the status of a moral ideal, and promoting the narrow-minded and irresponsible expert — Max Weber’s ‘specialist without spirit’ (*Fachmensch ohne Geist*) (be she or he technician or bureaucrat) — as a model for humanity. (emphasis Gorz 81)

Although Gorz is focusing on skilled labor positions in this section, the argument can be extended to white-collar workers as well. Carl views his wife’s work as “meaningful and enriching,” fulfilling a purpose much greater than his own at the ad agency (83). Carl, along with his coworkers, is frustrated with his inability to come up with ideas for the agency’s breast cancer campaign, which would be valuable to the same patients his wife treats; however, Carl’s creative block prevents him from achieving any sense of identity or fulfillment. Towards the end of the novel, Lynn acknowledges this by congratulating Carl on his resignation from the firm, admitting she knows the career “doesn’t make [him] happy” (Ferris 348).

It is perhaps because Carl’s self-worth is not equated with wealth, but with moral importance, that he is Tom’s primary point of contact in the office and therefore the frequent recipient of Emerson’s writings. After hearing of Carl’s mini-breakdown in the car with his wife, Tom brings Carl a collection of Emerson’s essays and poems, reading two selections from “Self-Reliance.” Tom begins with Emerson’s imperative, “Let a man then know his worth, and keep

things under his feet,” concluding with the “fable of the sot” who “now and then wakes up, exercises his reason and finds himself a true prince” (“Self-Reliance” 185-6). Tom explains:

[T]he problem with reading this guy . . . is the same problem you have reading Walt Whitman. You read him at all? Those two fucks wouldn’t have lasted two minutes in this place. Somehow they were exempt from office life. It was a different time, back then. And they were geniuses. But when I read them I start to wonder why *I* have to be here. It almost makes it harder to come in. (emphasis Ferris 86)

For all of Tom’s volatility, he remains constant in pushing Emerson on his coworkers, often framing it as something so they “see better where I’m coming from” (84). While an extended discussion of Emerson’s influence in *Then We Came to the End* is outside the scope of this dissertation, the common thread of Emerson’s works as presented in the novel — exclusively through Tom and the epigraph — is the importance of individual character. The novel’s epigraph from “The American Scholar” (“Is it not the chief disgrace in the world . . . to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong”) is not so much characteristic of the office, but of Tom’s attempts to define himself against his coworkers and career (“The American Scholar” 104). While the office workers do lead different lives after the agency either fires them all or folds — it remains unclear — only Carl left on his own terms.

After the narrative jump to 2006, the narrator reflects on everyone’s outcomes:

Updating our resumes, interviewing again, learning a new commute route. We had spread out across the industry, finding work at other agencies, at design firms and in-house marketing departments, usually the first that would have us. The less fortunate or talented among us went to direct-mail shops or turned to the temp agencies for uninsured day jobs. The floor plans, the shapes of the desks, the names of the people, and the colors of the corporate logos were all new and different, but the song and dance remained the same . . . [B]uried beneath all the bitching, there were parts of the job we loved. It was proof we needed the money. (Ferris 359)

As the workers adapt to their new jobs, the narrator muses that “You could reinvent yourself. Wasn’t that the promise of America?” (359). The workers certainly *could*, but in the exchange that follows between Benny and his now-superior Jim, there is little indication that they have

changed in any way other than within corporate hierarchy, based purely on when they were hired at their new jobs. Once again, as “we needed the money,” everyone is trying to maintain their expected standard of living. Considering the phrase “there were parts of the job we loved,” the novel rarely portrays an enjoyable aspect of work. Whatever comradeship is felt can dissolve in an instant with personality flaws or quirks, promotions, or perceived favoritism, and when the workers aren’t trying to avoid doing their jobs out of dread or boredom, the pressure is nearly unbearable. The only true enjoyment apparent in the workers’ careers are the fleeting moments of creative success when a proposed ad campaign is chosen, although given the economic downturn, these moments are increasingly rare.

Carl’s outcome is touted as “the very end of our story” well before the novel concludes (Ferris 327). Back with his wife Marilyn, Carl’s landscaping company works “in about twenty suburbs,” impressing his former colleagues (372). ““But you’re still no doctor, are you?” we expected Jim Jackers to say, but he said no such thing, and it didn’t even seem to be on Carl’s mind . . . as if landscaping had changed his life” (375). Tom briefly works for Carl’s landscaping company before joining the military, ironically foregoing his principles of individual triumph in exchange for the conformity he so despises. Tom inspires Carl’s landscaping business through a ranting email which promotes a suburban pastoral idyll:

I’ll tell you what I’m suggesting. I’m suggesting starting my own landscaping business. And I want you, Carl, to join me. I think that some communion with nature, even if it is just the goddamn lawns of suburban yokels, and the pathetic green postage stamps in the industrial parks of Hoffman Estates or Elk Grove Village, I think it might be exactly what’s missing in your life, Carl — what you lack without knowing you lack it. Think of it. The sun on the back of your neck. The taste of cold water after you’ve worked up a genuine thirst. The pleasures of a well-groomed lawn. And the sleep you will enjoy when every bone and muscle in your body has been thoroughly exhausted. (307)

Carl’s landscaping dream is cemented when confronted by Tom’s paintball gun, believing it to be real: “He wanted to live! He wanted to *landscape*” (emphasis Ferris 315). Ferris undercuts the

stark reality of death facing Carl with what seems to be the most mundane of wishes. While the threat of violence and death primarily incites the fear of losing a job for the rest of the office, for Carl death would take away his aspirations and sense of purpose. Although he is successful in his landscaping business, however, Carl's ability to achieve "self-reliance" is complicated by Adorno on identity, as I will explore in the following section.

The Emerson-Marx Connection

Having established the importance of Emerson to the text, this section considers the relationship between Emerson and Marx, tying a thread between the theoretical framework of this dissertation and the prominence of Emerson's philosophy. Citing an obscure and brief reference in one of Emerson's journals, Lewis S. Feuer links Emerson with an article written by Marx in 1853 ("Forced Emigration") to some versions of Emerson's poem fragment "Rex." Marx's quote is as follows: "The classes and the races too weak to master the new conditions of life must give way" (qtd. in Feuer 378). The extent of Emerson's journal commentary was the word "fate," but the quote was adapted into a poem fragment: "While classes or tribes, too weak to master / The flowing conditions of life, give way" (*Journals* 351). Feuer argues that Emerson's attraction was to the "grandiose vision of the dispossessed rising to reclaim their heritage;" in this instance, English farmers forced out by large farming operations and superior machinery (Feuer 378). The link may be more successful in considering Emerson's essay "Fate," published in a collection several years past the Marx article. As Emerson writes, paralleling the historical context of Marx's article:

We see the English, French, and Germans planting themselves on every shore and market of America and Australia, and monopolizing the commerce of these countries . . . The German and Irish millions, like the Negro, have a great deal of guano in their destiny. They are ferried over the Atlantic, and carted over America, to ditch and to drudge, to make corn cheap, and then to lie down prematurely to make a spot of green grass on the prairie. ("Fate" 266)

Even in America [United States], emigrated workers are exploited and succumb to an early death. Emerson is not clear on whether or not this is due to a lack of “self-reliance,” compared to their fellow countrymen who are successful. I am establishing this particular link between Emerson and Marx to examine Tom’s infatuation with Emerson, the urge to pursue landscaping in a major city (Chicago), and Carl’s successful escape from corporate life without being forced out through layoffs. At the same time, Emerson does not account for the development of late capitalism and his philosophy — as it is presented in Ferris’ text — stumbles when confronted with Carl’s suffering. Where Tom attempts to live as a nonconformist, Carl dutifully works in the office until facing the possibility of death, and only then does he embrace just the sensory aspects of landscaping which are quickly subsumed by market demand.

Although Marx is consistently critical of exploitative power relations throughout history, there is also a sense of nostalgia for working the land and a “return to nature” — albeit in conjunction with specific industrial conditions — against bourgeois concentrations of power in cities:

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life . . . Subjection of Nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground—what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour? (“Manifesto” 477)

Marx’s vision includes the merging of “agriculture with manufacturing industries; gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equitable distribution of the population over the country” (490). The technological instruments of production are to be claimed by the proletariat, even as Marx decries the advancements in technology which have created a skill-less labor, a “simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack” (479).

The broader, more important point is to change the cultural conditions under which labor takes place; however, there is a conflicting relationship between technology, the natural world, and labor which Marx does not entirely resolve, although he hints at its potential:

[In] communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (*The German Ideology* 53)

Vogel sees the problem as “alienation from our environment, our failure to see it as ours” with the solution being to reclaim nature without “*Naturwuchsigkeit*, the power uncomprehended social acts have over humans” (Vogel 384). This is to say, not using nature *for* capitalism, but for human utility, reevaluating our relationship with the natural world.²⁰ In the quote from *The German Ideology*, Marx illustrates the utility of nature in combination with a role within culture, omitting exploitative industry as a piece of everyday life. I agree with Vogel’s evaluation of technology’s role in relation to nature, within a Marxist framework:

We change [nature] through our labor in accordance with our needs and desires, and at the level of skill our knowledge and experience permits. Whether we do so well or poorly depends on the one hand on the current state of our understanding of nature and our skill at transforming it. But on the other hand (and much more importantly today, when our technical expertise has far surpassed the rationality of our social arrangements) it depends on our ability to articulate and to justify to ourselves socially what our needs and desires really are, and to determine democratically what we wish to do (and are willing to do, and to risk) to satisfy them. (381)

²⁰ See Foster’s *Marx’s Ecology* (2000) for a reinterpretation of Marx in light of “Green theory,” wherein Foster advocates for “recovering the deeper critique of the alienation of humanity from nature that was central to Marx’s work,” in the sense that elements of Marx’s work – in particular, materialist thought and dialectics – during the time period “led to the discovery of ecology . . . in the first place” (Foster 19-20).

Marx could not have foreseen such technological advancements to make, for example, “fast fashion” possible, an industry consuming massive amounts of resources in short periods of time to produce, package, and ship inexpensive commodities around the globe, all while creating massive waste and environmental damage.²¹ Technology’s role in labor, it is implied, ought to remain minimal, particularly as large-scale industry is often the only means of producing components for small-scale consumer manufacturing, such as casts for machinery.

If the advancements in technology have wiped out the need for skilled labor, distributing this technology to a more agrarian society does not solve the issue of skills. It would seem, at least in Gorz’s extension of Marx, that technology is a benefit:

The machine has taken the place of the slaves and the ‘associated producers’ organize themselves so as to reduce the necessary labour time ‘to a minimum,’ so that everyone can work, though only a little, and that everyone, *alongside* their work, can engage in the activities which are themselves their own end. (emphasis Gorz 165)

Truly autonomous work is done for the sake of self-fulfillment along with enjoyment of the work itself, and the concept of the “reciprocal gift” replaces the commodity form of exchange. Gorz stops short of fully embracing technological replacement of workers to meet basic needs, offering this example:

[A] neighborhood association whose members create a knitwear workshop with semi-professional equipment, with the aim of making pullovers for their own use, their own pleasure and even perhaps for an exhibition or a non-commercial competition . . . Each product is a ‘work of art’ which people have taken pleasure in making and which they will take pleasure in wearing or giving. (167)

²¹ See Nikolay Anguelov’s *The Dirty Side of the Garment Industry* for an in-depth examination of the development and practices of the “fast fashion” industry, particularly the greenwashing and culture industry manipulation of young consumers which perpetuate the industry’s growth.

The phrase “semi-professional” stands out as a desire for skilled labor, but not mass production, or something *too* technologically driven. While society’s needs could well be met through automation, the idea of a “slave to the machine” is unappealing, as is the “domination of nature” through technological advancement. Even as they critique craft industries, Marx and Gorz nonetheless admire *craftsmanship* in the sense of skilled labor. Gorz gives another example of this with a community oven for bread making as opposed to a designated baker existing for supplying basic needs. In the community setting, bread becomes art where “the pleasure of learning, co-operating and improving one’s skills is predominant and the need to feed oneself merely a subordinate consideration” (168). Carl appears to prize the efforts of labor, finding value in the work itself and a sense of fulfillment despite his resentment of his wife’s work.

Carl is able to leverage his career into the creation of the company, despite his lack of skill as a landscaper, calling his business Garbedian and Son: “He was entering into business with his father? ‘No, no,’ he grinned. ‘That’s just a little trick I picked up in advertising’” (Ferris 328). The narrator expects that “if everything went well, ‘Garbedian and Son’ meant three Hispanics would come to your home and manicure your lawn” (328). Between his resignation and the reunion five years later, it is not clear if Carl actually performs any labor to fulfill the sensory fantasy, or merely falls into a management role disconnected from the natural world as his company grows. Returning to Emerson and Marx, the two are fundamentally at odds in terms of the transcendentalist/materialist core tenants; however, it is necessary to account for both, in however limited a way, as my approach stems from Marxist strands of theory, and Emerson’s prominence in the text. While inspired by Tom and Emerson, Carl’s motivations are not spiritual as seen through the collective culture in the office. Carl seeks fulfillment and purpose, and the spiritual elements of Emerson are conspicuously absent from Ferris’ text. Landscaping’s appeal appears to be sensory, as described above, along with the desire to do something other than

office work by embracing nonconformity. Pursuing a passion project is nonconformist in the sense of risking a middle-class lifestyle, and Carl's success goes far beyond Tom's obnoxious "nonconformist" behavior as limited by office protocols. Emerson's lofty concept of "self-reliance" cannot be achieved against Adorno's concept of suffering, stemming from issues inherent to identity:

Identity is the primal form of ideology. We relish it as adequacy to the thing it suppresses; adequacy has always been subjection to dominant purposes and, in that sense, its own contradiction . . . The ideological side of thinking shows in its permanent failure to make good on the claim that the non-I is finally the I: the more the I thinks, the more perfectly will it find itself debased into an object . . . The subject is to see reason against its reason. (*Negative Dialectics* 148)

This conflict originates in the "barter principle" whereby — returning to Marx — alienation of labor and the "reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours" forces a totality on the world, preventing society from "[transcending] the identifying mode of thinking" (146-7). The issue with identitarian thinking is that rather than saying "what something is," instead it "says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself . . . [t]o define identity as the correspondence of the thing-in-itself to its concept is *hubris*" (emphasis *Negative Dialectics* 149). Ideology's insistence that "there should be no contradiction, no antagonism," against the fact of nonidentity is where suffering is produced, results in a cognitive dissonance which ideology attempts to mask (149). Tom's insistence on exercising reason is an impossible task under his material conditions. Emersonian ideals, as presented in the novel, are unattainable when confronted by late capitalism. Carl accepts the tradeoff of a somewhat-secure earning at the ad agency with the risk of starting an entirely different form of labor, but he cannot manage to service twenty suburbs by himself, necessitating some form of bureaucratic system to manage his employees, infrastructure, equipment, and so on. While this is speculation, it is certainly not implausible or unlikely that

Carl maintains the structure he is familiar with — that of an office — to carry out management of his landscaping business.

“This Trauma Could Have Been an Email:” The Office and Mental Health

Returning to trauma, I will now discuss the prevalence of mental health issues in the workplace. The lone fragment of a collective trauma narrative in *Then We Came to the End* appears in the announcement of Tom Mota’s death, a reminder of the trauma experienced from his rampage. The narrator attempts to play down the significance of the event:

This happened to *us*. And the great thing was, we could talk and talk without any of the casualties or long-term psychological damage of a Columbine or an Oklahoma City. We pretended to know something about what they had gone through. Maybe we did, who knows. Probably not. (emphasis Ferris 326)

Immediately following, however, the trauma of work culture surfaces, temporarily masked by Tom’s actions:

[O]ur real occupation was replaying events and reflecting on the consequences of still being alive. India reentered our horizons. Again, we took stock of our ultimate purpose. The idea of self-sacrifice, of unsung dedication and of dying a noble death, again reached the innermost sanctum where ordinarily resided our bank account numbers and retirement summaries. Maybe there was an alternative to wealth and success as the fulfillment of the American Dream . . . How could we be expected to break out of it, we who were overpaid, well insured, and bonanza’d with credit, we who were untrained in the enlightened practice of putting ourselves second? As Tom Mota was taking aim at our lives, we felt for a split second the ambiguous, foreign, confounding certainty that maybe we were getting what we deserved. Luckily that feeling soon passed . . . of course we deserved all that we had, we had worked long, hard hours for it all, and how dare that fucker [Tom] even pretend to take it away? (326)

The only compensation afforded to the office is the afternoon off, and the narrator comments that while Amber goes on leave for post-traumatic stress, “we, too, suffered from stress and all sorts of disorders and would have liked more than an afternoon” (327). It is difficult to tell if this is a genuine admission or jealousy which delegitimizes Amber’s condition. Some workers, however, side with management about bringing everyone back on Monday:

If they didn't win the new business, they were screwed. And who did they screw when they got screwed? You betcha. So we hustled back Monday morning and pretended to work while carrying on the conversation that started Friday after Tom's arrest and continued unflagging through the weekend. (327)

Despite fears of management's wrath, the "compulsion to repeat" is stronger among the "survivor" community in the office, some of which makes it out of the group on the weekend but primarily stays in the usual channels of office gossip.

The narrator declares that "the central message we wanted to convey, the moral of the story and the kernel of truth, was how relieved we were not to have died at work" (327). At the same time, work is absolutely necessary to preserve a standard of living and therefore requires long hours, such as the "fire alarm" events:

A new client pitch due Monday meant a full week of one o'clock nights and a few hours of sleep on random sofas on Sunday . . . There was no going to the gym. Theater tickets were canceled. You saw no one, not your five-year-old, not your marriage counselor, not your sponsor, not even your dog. (21)

These events are feared, yet the narrator insists that they foster a sense of camaraderie.

Coworkers are incredulous at the idea of quitting such a job, wondering:

Where had they found the derring-do? What would they do about car payments? We got together for going-away drinks on their final day and tried to hide our envy while reminding ourselves that we still had the freedom and luxury to shop indiscriminately. (57)

The only person in the core group to escape on their own terms is Carl, and the narrator gives the usual set of excuses for everyone else remaining in their jobs:

We had our bills to pay and our limitations to consider. We had our families to support and our weekends to distract us. We suffered failures of imagination just like everyone else, our daring was wanting, and our daily contentment too nearly adequate for us to give it up. (328)

The fear of dying at work is secondary to the fear of not working and losing the trappings of a middle class life. Hank's Ovid quotation ("When death comes, let it find me at my work") is immediately met with backlash, as the narrator declares that "We wanted to die on a boat. We

wanted to die on an island, or in a log cabin on a mountainside, or on a ten-acre farm with an open window and a gentle breeze” (327). Such death fantasies are not possible without the inevitable over-working of employees, who must suffer from work to fulfill their aspirations for death. The reality of death at work becomes, at least for a moment, more tangible when the office sends around a news article about a man dying at his desk, much like Blumquist in *The Pale*

King:

A man working at an office much like ours had a heart attack at his desk, and for the rest of the day people passing by his work-station failed to notice. That wasn't the newsworthy bit — there are, what, a hundred and fifty million of us in the workplace? It was bound to happen to somebody . . . The article went on to explain that Friday had passed, and then the weekend, and no one had discovered this man fallen in his cubicle . . . Then we were supposed to believe that *Monday* came around, Monday with its meetings and returned phone calls, its resumption of routine and reinstatement of duty, *Monday* came and went, and they didn't find him either . . . We kept asking ourselves how could that be possible? Surely *someone* had to come by with a request for a meeting. Someone had to come by to inquire why a meeting was missed . . . We didn't know how that could happen. (emphasis Ferris 159-60)

The shock, as noted in the narrative, came from *how long* the body was left, not that someone had died at their desk. This becomes a cultural failing wherein responsibilities were not met and no one was held accountable for missed meetings. The man is only found when coworkers “went in search of a rotten banana,” inconvenienced not by the man's absence, but by the office nuisance of an unpleasant smell (160). Talk of the article quickly transitions into fear of the unknown, layoffs, and the potential for losing status:

A backyard swimming pool. A long weekend in Vegas. A low-end BMW. These were not Jeffersonian ideals, perhaps, on par with life and liberty, but at this advanced stage, with the West won and the Cold War over, they, too, seemed among our inalienable rights. (160)

The fear of death and the unknown are put at bay for the more immediate concern of feeling entitled to a middle class life under late capitalism.

The office's only outlet to mental health care is through the HR department, which

functions to keep the employees at work despite the toll it takes on their health:

Why was it so terrifying, almost like death, one morning of a hundred, to walk back to your own office and pass alone through its doorway? Why was the dread so suffocating? Most days, no problem. Work to be done. A pastry. Storm clouds out the window that looked, in their menace, sublime. But one out of a hundred mornings it was impossible to breathe. Our coffee tasted poisonous. The sight of our familiar chairs oppressed us. The invariable light was deadening.

We fought with depression. One thing or another in our lives hadn't worked out, and for a long period of time we struggled to overcome it. We took shpwrs sitting down and couldn't get out of bed on weekends. Finally we consulted HR about the details of seeing a specialist, and the specialist prescribed medication. Marcia Dwyer was on Prozac. Jim Jackers was on Zoloft and something else. Dozens of others took pills all day long, which we struggled to identify, there were so many of them, in so many different colors and sizes. Janine Gorjanc was on a cocktail of several different meds, including lithium. (Ferris 56-7)

Although the narrator attributes this to “one thing or another in our lives,” it is clear that the workers' lives are centered in the office, either causing whatever “hadn't worked out” or at the very least exacerbating it to unbearable levels. And yet, as the narrator states, “for all the depression no one ever quit. When someone quit, we couldn't believe it” (57). As detailed above, this comes from the desire to sustain a standard of living. Implicitly, in the US, this also means access to healthcare, necessary to treat the trauma which the job partially or wholly inflicts. The work-trauma cycle may leave employees with limited options for healthcare after termination, depending on benefits and the circumstances under which an employee departs, and certainly without an income to help afford medical care, likely leaving trauma unresolved.²²

At the end of the novel, the narrator attempts to deflect the trauma of work onto coworkers and their mannerisms:

²² Classically, COBRA (the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act), although “continuation coverage is often more expensive” than group health plans due to the lack of employer subsidization (Department of Labor).

The funny thing about work itself, it was so bearable. The dreariest task was perfectly bearable. It presented challenges to overcome, the distraction provided by a sense of urgency, and the satisfaction of a task's completion — on any given day, those things made work utterly, even harmoniously bearable. What we bitched about, what we couldn't let lie, what drove us to distraction and consumed us with blind fury, was this person or that who rankled and bugged and offended angels in heaven, who wore their clothes all wrong and foisted upon us their insufferable features, who deserved from a just god nothing but scorn because they were insipid, unpoetic, mercilessly enduring, and lost to the grand gesture . . . But as we stood there, we had a hard time recalling the specific details, because everyone seemed so agreeable. (Ferris 376)

This particular reminiscence, at a “reunion” of sorts, ignores the one commonality that all of the characters had together: the corporate culture. The narrator finds it easy enough to waive off the particulars of behavior that vexed them so much, instead encountering their now-former coworkers in an alternate environment. A transference occurs, shifting the embodiment of attitudes toward work onto colleagues. The entirety of the novel consists of reveling in distractions from work, such as storytelling and gossip, paranoia and speculation over layoffs, and interpersonal relationships. A key factor to this is what the narrator describes as “forgetting”:

Some people would never forget certain people, a few people would remember everyone, and most of us would mostly be forgotten . . . But did anybody want to be forgotten about completely? We had dedicated years to that place, we labored under the notion we were making names for ourselves, we had to believe in our hearts that each one of us was memorable. (368-9)

This is exemplified by Jim and Benny trying to recall anything past the name of Hank Neary, whose book reading event draws most of the old office back together at the end of the novel. The narrator explains the particulars of forgetting:

Most of us recalled in a general way this person or that, their features exaggerated by memory, their names lost forever. Of others we could pull up only the murkiest general outline, as if rather than walking past them in the hall a hundred times a day, we'd encountered them in a cloud once, mumbled a polite exchange, and moved on. Once in a great while, every random detail — tone of voice, where the mole was — came screaming out of the clear blue. What a weird sensation that was. (369)

Everyone's worst fear is to be forgotten, as "oblivion was terror," but the narrator is confident that they "would never be forgotten by anyone" (369). Speaking on the subject of memory as it relates to trauma, van der Kolk and van der Hart reference Janet's theories of memory, namely the narrative memory against habit memory. The everyday routines of work in Ferris' novel would fall under habit memory, the "automatic integration of new information *without much conscious attention to what is happening*" (emphasis mine, van der Kolk and van der Hart 160).

This is in contrast to narrative memory:

In order to memorize well, one must pay special attention to what is going on. Narrative memory consists of mental constructs, which people use to make sense out of experience (e.g., Janet, 1928). Janet thought that the case with which current experience is integrated into existing mental structures depends on the subjective assessment of what is happening: familiar and awareness of details of the particulars, while frightening or novel experiences may not easily fit into existing cognitive schemes and either may be remembered with particular vividness or may totally resist integration. Under extreme conditions, existing meaning schemes may be entirely unable to accommodate frightening experiences, which causes the memory of these experiences to be stored differently and not be available for retrieval under ordinary conditions: it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness. (160)

The key is the "*what is happening*," which is lost in Ferris' forgetting. The memory fragments are out of context when recalled and are details of features rather than interactions. The "ordinary conditions" that exist in the novel are presented only after the narrative jump when the discussion of forgetting is brought up, implying that the time spent at the ad agency was one of trauma as the memories from the agency cannot be retrieved other than in terms of habit, such as routine office tasks like email, causing the trauma to return to the individual.

Tom's Epiphany: Emerson, Trauma, and the Culture Industry

Building off the discussion of Emerson, trauma, and the culture industry, I will now demonstrate how all three work together towards the novel's conclusion. Ferris provides both the individual and collective narratives of Tom Mota's paintball spree, but ensures that the collective is a legal and cultural device designed to correct the inconsistencies in individual accounts,

functioning much like Freud's concept of secondary revision in dream-work. After following Tom through his actions with the omniscient narrator, the office staff recollections vary wildly: "We bounced back. Or we quit. Or we took a vacation. For two or three weeks there we had a tough time resisting the urge to replay events. Everyone had a version. Conflicting accounts never diminished one side or the other, they only made the matter richer" (Ferris 325). As a legal device, everyone "would likely be deposed for this," as an employee in Project Services decides to sue any entity remotely involved or in proximity to the event (325). The "we" as a collective narrator provides the details of Tom's actions along with the actions of those in the office at the time, allowing readers to objectively observe the event, while the individual accounts, although differing, are primarily left unspoken. The exception to this, however, is Joe's story of his visit to Tom in jail. The office's accounts differ around the crucial detail of what Tom's overarching purpose was:

Joe looked around the room. We were quiet. "Do you remember what he said to me?" he asked us. "He was standing in the hallway, holding the gun, which I thought was real at the time. And he says, remember what he said? He said, 'Joe, I came to take you to lunch.'"

Some of us recalled hearing Tom say that and some of us were hearing it for the first time. What we remembered most clearly was Tom unfurling some lunatic gibberish as he wheeled and aimed and pulled the trigger — crazy talk that announced we were in the hands of a madman.

"No, after all that," said Joe. "The last thing he said before Andy tackled him."

...

According to Joe, Tom said it so calmly and matter-of-factly that it was almost as shocking as finding him there at all. (339-40)

Tom's "gibberish" was an excerpt from Emerson's "Man the Reformer," and in particular Emerson's views on "the general system of our trade," echoing the form of business – the culture industry – the ad agency engages in:

I content myself with the fact that the general system of our trade (apart from the blacker traits, which, I hope, are exceptions denounced and unshared by all reputable men) is a system of selfishness; is not dictated by the high sentiments of human nature; is not measured by the exact law of reciprocity, much less by the sentiments of love and

heroism, but is a system of distrust, of concealment, of superior keenness, not of giving but of taking advantage. (“Man the Reformer” 132)

Tom’s infatuation with Emerson is not shared by his coworkers; however, with the frequency at which Tom references Emerson in his ranting emails and day-to-day conversations, it is not a surprise to readers. This critique of the advertising agency’s role in the culture industry is vastly overshadowed by the trauma of Tom’s delivery, and the significance of his words are lost on the office staff who collectively recall “gibberish” with the exception of Joe, who arrives only in time to hear Tom’s lunch invitation. Tom momentarily cracks the ideological veil of the culture industry through a violent act, exposing the “fissure” of the Real; however, the juxtaposition of the fissure with his clown attire and paintball guns means that while he finally proves enough of a disruption to ideology, the disruption is equally distracting from what he accomplishes. Despite the looming presence of Emerson in the novel, particularly through Tom’s many emails and rants, this presence is waived off as part of Tom’s eccentricities.

Tom, more than any other character, attempts to hold to his Emersonian principles despite working in a field which, as seen in the quote from “Man the Reformer” above, runs contrary to the “high sentiments of human nature.” When Joe visits him in prison, Tom reveals that his actions in regard to Emersonian principles were ultimately futile:

I stayed late and went by everybody’s desk and spun the [radio] dial. I wore three polos on top of each other for a month, Joe, because I wasn’t being fooled and I wanted people to know it. I learned all that from reading Emerson. To conform is to lose your soul. So I dissented every chance I got and I told them fuck you and eventually they fired me for it, but I thought, Ralph Waldo Emerson would be proud of Tom Mota. (Ferris 343)

Yet, reflecting on the reaction when Tom scrawled the word “fag” on Joe’s office wall — Joe left it up and continued to work — Tom admits that he admired and loved Joe for it:

“I had wanted to smash your face in . . . I couldn’t stomach the sight of you. I wanted to apologize for that. That’s why I wanted to take you to lunch . . . But as that fuck so eloquently puts it, ‘Character teaches above our wills.’ And before I knew it, I had the paintball gun thing all worked out in my head and I just couldn’t stop myself.” (346)

Tom gestures with his hands that Joe is “up here,” implying that Tom failed in his efforts to truly disrupt anything and that Joe’s non-reaction made him superior in the embodiment of Emerson’s ideals.

Tom does not offer a detailed explanation of how exactly Joe fits this embodiment, but the implication, I argue, is related to Emerson’s “theory of books.” Tom’s obsession with reading Emerson leads him to be “subdued by his instruments,” preventing him from becoming “Man Thinking” (“The American Scholar” 89). Tom does not engage in “creative reading,” falling into what Emerson derides as “the parrot of other men’s thinking” (85). In contrast, Joe’s recent ascension in the company, along with his exemplary pitch for an extremely difficult cold sore treatment campaign, speaks to his creative abilities. Coupled with his lack of fear, Joe better fits the “Scholar” figure and Tom recognizes this quality, humbled by seeing a manifestation of the rhetoric he so frequently invoked.

Conclusion

Ferris’ novel offers the most traditional office environment of the four novels, showing interplay between coworkers and management, “lived experience” of economic downturn and mass layoffs, and the very real threat of a disgruntled ex-employee. Slow violence plays out in ways similar to *The Pale King* and *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* in terms of boredom and mental health, with Carl as the primary example of the effects of late capitalism’s pressures and cultural expectations. What differentiates this text, however, is the threat of layoffs and corresponding paranoia the office experiences as employees disappear one by one. All of the workers fear losing their ample salaries and benefits, especially when their working lives are filled with avoiding work as much as possible, all the while pushing their standards of living higher with each promotion. Late capitalism’s pressures to maintain output and “climb the ladder,” so to

speak, are the primary contributors to trauma in the office, forcing short deadlines with large amounts of money at stake for national ad campaigns. While traditional bureaucracy is not the form of the company, bureaucratic elements are present and cause immense stress; in particular, the bureaucrat inventorying office furniture. Only Carl manages to truly escape, starting his own landscaping company for a sense of self-fulfillment; however, for a brief moment, Tom manages to recognize the company for what it is: an arm of the culture industry. Tom's disruption of this ideology, unfortunately, is overshadowed by his violent actions and recalled as merely "gibberish" by his traumatized coworkers.

Looking more broadly at the novel, *Then We Came to the End* is the most prominent representation of the culture industry and the decline of the office proper, as we are seeing in the COVID era. In the second to last page of the novel, Benny is unable to reach Joe's work number and is dismayed, declaring that Joe "never leaves his desk" (Ferris 384). While the immediate answer appears to be that Joe no longer works for the company, the idea that he "never leaves his desk" speaks to the corporate culture at large of always being reachable, no matter the time, for the purposes of work. Joe's position at the old ad agency seemed to set him on a career path for management, or even partnership, but as Tom realized, Joe better embodied the "Scholar," and perhaps pursued something else as an individual "truly original" (Sealts 195). While some of the core characters have returned to office work, their interests have diverged significantly in the several years since layoffs, indicating that a fair number likely decided to pursue careers elsewhere, if not explicitly stated. The culture industry was also forced to reevaluate itself after September 11th:

[M]any industry leaders were actually in a profound state of confusion about just what it was that the public wanted. Even while industry leaders were eager to censor trauma-inducing images of any kind, video outlets reported that, when left to their own discretion, consumers were eagerly purchasing terrorist flicks like *The Siege* and *The Towering Inferno*. (Spigel 236)

Advertising revenue dropped by \$320 million the week after September 11th, and nationalistic content became the entertainment commodity (236). The underlying mechanisms of the culture industry did not change; however, the content required a quick shift to fit a political purpose and meet consumer demand for terrorist-related spectacle in private, and patriotic propaganda in public. The stark absence of September 11th in the novel neatly sidesteps the culture industry's role in the War in Afghanistan, but the setup of the ad agency's aims and power is clear enough in the novel: to create a desire for something that the public didn't even know they wanted.

The novel's intertextuality with Emerson, against my critical framework, opens a point of discourse between Emerson and Marx and further opportunities for scholarship.

CHAPTER VI: CODA

Throughout this dissertation, interplay of the four core concepts has been demonstrated in these novels in a variety of manifestations, all of which show the stresses and exploitations of the American office worker in a late capitalist system. Trauma, in its multiplicities, encroaches with slow violence, and the distinction between work and leisure is all but gone. As a supposedly logical system pursuing increasing efficiency and productivity at lessening costs, (late) capitalism contains an un-logic as its resources — humans — become damaged under the demands of their work. Slowly, as capitalism and empire expand, the end result will be “inescapable universal bureaucratization” (*Political Writings* 279). Capitalism’s system of rationalization dissolves distinctions between the work and a personal life outside of work as more demand is placed on the subject. As Horkheimer and Adorno argue:

[E]ven during their leisure time, consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production . . . for the consumer there is nothing left to classify, since the classification has already been preempted by the schematism of production. (Horkheimer and Adorno 98)

The culture industry automatically provides an ideology for the worker and continues to do so even outside of work. There is no “outside” of culture for the worker, under the same culture which dictates their work and leisure time. The worker is always under social pressure to consume and be subsumed, and to work harder for the company. As Lenin states in response to Taylor’s findings and methodology:

What is this “scientific system?” Its purpose is to squeeze out of the worker three times more labour during a working day of the same length as before . . . the most economical and most efficient working methods are developed . . . and if [the worker] dies young? Well, there are many others waiting at the gate! (Lenin 594)

Workers are expendable, and if they collapse under the physical and psychological pressures of late capitalism’s demands, it is attributed to personal failings rather than a systemic failure.

These four novels speak to Wallace's assertion in the "Author's Foreword" chapter: "I can't think that anyone really believes that today's so-called 'information society' is just about information. Everyone knows it's about something else, way down," qualified with a footnote, "whether consciously or not" (*Pale King* 87n28). This "something else," Wallace suggests, is "some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in some ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention" (87). The IRS employees' attempts to stay focused, Josephine and Lila Mae's investigations, and the ad agency's constant gossip serve to distract from excruciating circumstances. The novels are marketed to serve this function themselves, with *The Pale King*, *Then We Came to the End*, and *The Intuitionist* featuring "reading group" guides, and *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* featuring in numerous "top," "best," or "notable" lists of 2015, inviting themselves onto our bookshelves with high-profile endorsements and media buzz. Yet these do not glamorize the labor they portray: readers are presented with bleak renderings of the white-collar world which they themselves may inhabit day-to-day, packaged for mass consumption. Art allows for a buffer between readers and the Nietzschean "horror," and yet it also reveals this same horror in a form of immanent critique. I wish to briefly return to Postone's critique of Critical Theory. As demonstrated in my arguments, Critical Theory, particularly as developed by Adorno, is not an inadequate way to utilize Marx, and immanent critique is sufficiently possible *from the standpoint of labor* itself. We see this embodied in the narratives themselves, expressing suffering under the objectivity conferred by late capitalism: the conditions for immanent critique have already been met, and the novels express a disquieting truth, confronting readers with the "real Real" of their position in late capitalism.

To explicate Adorno further, he claims that “suffering is one of the most fundamental human experiences . . . [arising] out of an unmediated, effectively prediscursive encounter with the world. In that encounter, the sufferer experiences something external to the self – something oppressive” (Pollock 727). There is a perpetual “tension between that which can never really be conveyed – the original encounter with the external, and in that sense objective, world that produces suffering – and the necessary but invariably inadequate attempts to express or represent that encounter” (727). The point of a “negative dialectics” is not to make sense of this inherent suffering, which would be phenomenally offensive and ignorant after the Shoah, nor is it to retreat to nihilism which would prefer mass extinction. Instead, the goal is to perpetually chip away at the suffering caused by the imposition of identity: “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things” (*Negative Dialectics* 11). It is through the speculative moment that ideology can crack, and suffering can slowly be reduced, inching us towards the possibility of an existence without prediscursive “unreason.” My argument for considering a world foreclosed by bureaucratic structures in late capitalism cannot retreat into nihilism, nor do I think rationalizing cosmetic changes to contemporary labor and cultural conditions as truly progressive and meaningful is a solution either. Instead, as these novels demonstrate, we are forced to work and live in the “wrong state of things” as the information economy enmeshes our personal and professional lives. We must aspire, then, to embrace the “breaks that resist identity” in order to work towards a world without suffering (“Metaphysics” 148).

It is my hope that future scholarship can continue from this framework to investigate white-collar working conditions in whatever form the post-pandemic novel will take. As of this conclusion’s writing during the Omicron variant surge, many companies have delayed return-to-office dates again, making work-from-home and hybrid models a prominent fixture of workers’ lives. The future of the office is uncertain, and permanent shifts in its configuration are likely.

What has not changed, however, is the underlying cultural and economic ideology. Working from home obliterates the work/leisure divide, especially when public spaces are no longer available to use out of health and safety concerns. Setting up a designated “home office” space still necessitates the use of the home, and the workplace now encroaches on what used to be personal space. Instead of trauma and slow violence in the office, we are now forced to experience it in our living spaces, unable to try and “leave work at work” so to speak. This new modality of workplace will have lasting and unforeseen effects to be addressed in future scholarship. The era of the traditional office has undoubtedly passed, and it remains to be seen if we will look back on it with longing nostalgia. As acerbically suggested by Wallace, however, we may rather drown in Jell-O.

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