

UNTANGLING THE KNOT:  
THE THEORY GENERATION, IRONY, AND NEOLIBERALISM

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*For Skylar, Norman, and my parents*

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ABSTRACT

Significant typological work has been done in cataloging forms of life, literature, and culture in the alleged aftermath of the epoch of postmodernism, but recent critical works invite deeper considerations of the political valences of formal interventions made by authors writing at a specific mid-aughts moment of potential torch-passing. These works help not to strike down this or that form as complicit nor make sweeping claims as to the features of the current moment, but to critique more deeply the relationships these novels have to the proliferating discourses of postmodernity, irony, and an economic order that ostensibly began as an elitist, revanchist endeavor but transformed into what Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith dub its “ontological phase,” from which they emerged. Reconsidering a sample of novels diverse in their approaches to fiction in the light of equally diverse critical interventions united in their attention to politics and aesthetics seems a necessary counter-hegemonic project allowing for unique insights at a time when the discourses surrounding these novels and critical interventions have only become more complex.

## Untangling the Knot: The Theory Generation, Irony, and Neoliberalism

### Introduction

Others have done significant typological work in cataloging forms of life, literature, and culture in the alleged aftermath of the epoch of postmodernism, but recent critical works invite deeper considerations of the political valences of formal interventions made by authors writing at a specific mid-aughts moment of potential torch-passing. Lee Konstantinou provides some categorizations of the literature produced in the wake of postmodernism and gives nuanced context to the dominant narratives of irony in American fiction, sorting out some of the resulting political implications. Other recent proposals in theory and criticism, disparate in their projects and purviews, can aid critiques that continue the project of sorting out the relationships that contemporary literary works have to previous periods, the perceived ails of the current moment, and potential aesthetic futures. Offering robust priorities and legitimate criticism, these works help not to strike down this or that literary form as complicit nor make sweeping claims as to the features of the current moment, but to interrogate more deeply the proliferating discourses of postmodernity, irony, and the economic order that ostensibly began as an elitist, revanchist endeavor but transformed into what Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith dub its “ontological phase,” from which they emerged. Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*, Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*, and Colson Whitehead’s *Apex Hides the Hurt*, provide a fruitful sample in their different approaches to fiction during a time in which the theoretical façade that said humankind had peaked and reached equilibrium was beginning to show signs of stress. Using diverse but united critical interventions to reconsider an equally diverse and united cluster of novels seems a

necessary counter-hegemonic project allowing for unique insights at a time when the discourses surrounding these novels and critical interventions have only become more complex.

### **Critical Frameworks: Post-Irony, Political Formalism, and the Affective Hypothesis**

The plurality of forms that literature has taken in the last thirty years or so are not easily codified, as Lee Konstantinou and the editors of *Metamodernism* make clear. Many postmodern forms appear to have persisted unaffected, while some authors who cut their teeth on postmodern theory and literature have tried to consciously respond to it in their works. The political goals, entanglements, and ramifications of these approaches are as diverse as the approaches themselves. Some of these forms are arguably more helpful than others, but we should generally dispel the notion that we can account for any of these positions as being inherently subversive or complicit based, at least, on the ways they treat “the difficult problem of irony,” which Konstantinou says must be addressed in efforts concerned with whatever cultural dominant has succeeded postmodernism (88). The problem of irony is certainly difficult, so I will begin by briefly sketching the narrative of its cultural role in the last half-century or so, the corrective measures taken to this narrative, and the ways Konstantinou organizes literary responses to the problem irony posed to authors writing as postmodern forms began to lose purchase.

If irony is a focal point for any incipient investigation into literature in the wake of postmodernity, David Foster Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” is an entirely unavoidable touchstone. This touchstone, paired with the extended scene that Konstantinou sets in *Cool Characters*, provides an admittedly attractive narrative in which writers of the Theory Generation (Dames) believed an essentially cynical and wholly co-opted irony to be symptomatic of the impossibility of optimism and alternatives after the Cold War



victory of liberalism. A reading of this hypothesis that generously ignores Konstantinou's interventions as well as the ill-defined (at best) politics of the individuals most closely associated with it may conclude that the eclipsing of irony represents the aesthetic corollary of a post-capitalist politics. Konstantinou ultimately provides a characterological history of irony that complicates this narrative, conceptualizing irony as a "way of being in and interpreting the world," rather than a trope or figure and deducing that Wallace's reading of irony, influential as it was, was also mistaken in its assumption of irony's midcentury criticism, description of irony's co-optation, and belief in the political horizon on the other side of irony.

Wallace set the stage for new relationships to irony in 1993, but his own formal relationships with the literary technique were far from ubiquitous. This is why the typological work Konstantinou does in "Four Faces of Postirony" serves as a useful starting point and organizing principle. Konstantinou categorizes the four faces into Motivated Postmodernism (author uses postmodern content and form not to criticize reality, but merely to register and describe reality in a way that approaches realism), Credulous Metafiction (author uses postmodern form to reject postmodern content and rehabilitate values tarnished by postmodernism), Postironic Bildungsroman (author eschews both postmodern form and content in favor of more traditional modes, viewing irony as a steppingstone on the path through cynicism towards a postirony defined by realism), and Relational Art (author uses realism and minimalism to expose an awkward reality, explore failures of intersubjectivity, and call attention via literature to the values of new materialisms). I will engage with these categories more thoroughly in readings of my chosen novels, but a brief overview is helpful to begin considering diverse positions taken by authors concerned with irony and the ways the results of those positions might aid counter-hegemonic projects or fall short.

Although irony is implicated for Anna Kornbluh in a radically different context, the mention of its “deification” in the introduction to her 2019 *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* opens a space for me to include her work in my project (2). Kornbluh’s association of irony with a ubiquitous critical impulse towards “taking things apart,” suggests not only the enduring dominance of the assumption that irony and destruction walk hand in hand—this time in theory and criticism rather than literature—but also a way we might dig deeper into contemporary novels’ orientation of themselves with regards to irony while also remaining cognizant of the political imperatives she outlines. To be sure, Kornbluh is not concerned with irony as such à la Wallace or Konstantinou. Irony is only culpable for Kornbluh insofar as it contributes to the actual dilemma she diagnoses: the overwhelming convictions in literary criticism and critical theory that “life springs forth and thrives in form’s absence,” which she attempts to counter by formally attending to (Victorian) realism’s “ontological propensity for futurity,” (2, 32).

If we combine a reliance on Kornbluh’s invocations of irony in her introduction with the generous reading of Wallace (via the thin reading of Konstantinou) offered earlier, we might come out on the other side ready to dismiss this conception of postmodern irony wholesale, casting those authors still employing it in the role of Kornbluh’s destituent ‘anarcho-vitalists,’ and celebrating the authors invested in its usurpation as practicing ‘political formalists.’ Konstantinou teases out several problems with this. For one, authors associated with this ‘post-ironic,’ movement, such as Wallace and Dave Eggers, are not so comfortably situated within Kornbluh’s binary. The most Kornbluh-ian way to attend to them may be to laude their individual commitments to formal construction while articulating the need for better ones and articulating their missteps. For Konstantinou, Wallace “sought to defeat bad institutions... by

constructing a characterological model committed to belief,” rather than one representing a legitimate opposition to power, and while Eggers may understand “the importance of constructing alternative institutions,” he fails to achieve any kind of challenge to an omnipresent political hegemony via those institutions (215). The fictional figures that later emerge out of and respond to their post-ironic landscape are similarly ambiguous, capturing an aesthetic orientation like that of the novelist, which capitalizes on marketing trends while also attempting to retain a distance from this capitalization.

Dave Eggers provides a segue to the argument that rounds out the primary critical underpinnings of my exploration of the different forms contemporary fiction took at a moment of multiple potential sea changes. Rachel Greenwald Smith’s *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015) takes aim at Eggers’ memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) in a chapter on neoliberal agency and textual systems. Smith says of Eggers’ famously paratextual and emotionally provocative memoir:

The pleasure it produces is symptomatic of how comfortably it sits with neoliberal emotional norms, providing a strong sense of readerly orientation that allows the experience of sentimental feelings to seem as if they easily coincide with the individual pursuit of autonomy (Smith 89).

Greenwald Smith is not in the business of taking up irony in her work but does underscore Eggers’ and others’ shortcomings by tying the compromise that they found between formal experimentation and the status quo to a corollary text of that status quo, which Konstantinou contends post-ironic writers were attempting to oppose. In her Epilogue, she writes, “the logic of successful aesthetic compromise,” parallels the political compromises, “espoused by neoliberal utopianisms,” such as those of Francis Fukuyama (128). Greenwald Smith and Konstantinou are

both critical of the forms Eggers employs in his work, but Smith homes in on Eggers' perhaps unwitting analogy to the emotional norms of neoliberalism. This is the broad focus of *Affect* and will contribute to a more comprehensive survey of the perks and pitfalls of the distinct ways in which the works of contemporary literature considered here attempt to critique reality and formally engage with potential alternatives at the epicenter of discourses of irony, postmodernity, and neoliberalism.

Taken together, Konstantinou, Kornbluh, and Smith offer fresh perspectives on reading contemporary literature produced at a unique, post-9/11 pre-Occupy discursive nexus. A common thread in literature of this nexus is reification. Zadie Smith, Colson Whitehead, and Tom McCarthy deal with the elusive nature of beauty and academia, the trouble of giving something so confining as a name to a space so diverse as a town, and the rocky relationship of language to matter, respectively. Returning to this nexus with these fresh perspectives and attending to the ways different novels mediate a time of sweeping temporal declarations, shifting aesthetic forms, and the full force of global capital hardly seems irrelevant. This period feels additionally insightful as arguments of the temporalities of irony, postmodernity, and neoliberalism continue to abound while the political problem of reification has, in some ways, been overcome, with slogan-esque rhetoric offering concrete solutions and oppositional politics in ways not previously taken seriously.<sup>1</sup>

### **Political Formalism and Anarcho Vitalism in *On Beauty***

Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* is a work that risks inviting the kind of reading that simplifies the historical periods of postmodernism and whatever has succeeded it into debates between

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<sup>1</sup> Here, I am thinking about the Occupy Wall Street movement's 99% concept giving way to the rise of political figures such as Bernie Sanders and rallying cries like 'Abolish the Police,' being taken more seriously than previously thought possible as a result of increased attention to police brutality.

anarcho-vitalism and political formalism. In “Four Faces of Postirony,” Konstantinou uses the novel as an example of what he calls the ‘Postironic Bildungsroman,’ a popular contemporary mode in which irony is perceived to be a “necessary, but a temporary stepping stone toward a full appreciation of the power of tradition,” (96). The traditional form here is realism. As we will see, literature produced through turbulent, changing climates of postmodernity, irony, and neoliberalism maintains interesting relationships to traditional realism. The clarion calls of authors such as Jonathan Franzen and Tom Wolfe at the end of the twentieth century may have established realism as a dominant trope of ‘post-postmodern’ writing, but the works I will discuss are as heterogeneous in their handlings of realism as they are postmodernism, going beyond efforts to rehabilitate the social novel form after the heydays of irony, metafiction, and non-referential linguistic play.<sup>2</sup>

*On Beauty* is an homage to E.M. Forster and fits the Postironic Bildungsroman bill well but represents a more ambiguous deployment of the traditionally realist form than the hard stances on the potential of turning back the clock (especially given the range of forms Smith has utilized throughout her career) taken by Franzen and Wolfe.<sup>3</sup> It does, however, remain overt in

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<sup>2</sup> A note on realism after postmodernism: In “Post-Postmodern Realism,” Madhu Dubey concludes that the challenge posed by postmodernism to the social novel (which I will write more about in my discussion of *Remainder*), “cannot be solved on formal grounds by reviving narrative realism,” (369). While this ultimately may be true, and is certainly truer of *On Beauty* than other novels due to its explicit Forster homage, there remain valuable insight to works that take different approaches to realism and postmodern aesthetics after the syntheses of the two elements in authors such as Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor which, however wrongly, was perceived as referentially relevant in ways thought no longer possible by the time authors like Smith, Whitehead, and McCarthy came of age.

<sup>3</sup> Zadie Smith’s connection (or lack thereof) to realism has been famously documented by James Wood. While in general I attempt to avoid writing off literature or criticism as wholly complicit, it’s difficult not to see Wood’s literary priorities as unhelpful at the very least to any critical project with its sights set on subversion. Rachel Greenwald Smith notes Wood’s citation of Forster in describing Charles Dickens’ characters as “vivid blots of essence,” rather than actual representations of actual people. Wood dislikes this, but Forster “admires the best writers of flat characters, who... generat[e] a kind of diffuse energy through the movement, connection, and friction of their characters’ surfaces,” (13). Although Greenwald Smith’s work takes a backseat to Kornbluh and Konstantinou in my reading of *On Beauty* (and it would be difficult to present the novel as the kind of impersonal-feelings-producing novel Greenwald Smith exalts in *Affect*), the Wood connection and Forster homage do present compelling alignments.

its concerns with the changing purchase of irony (especially in academia). Beginning here allows us to take larger stock of one of many positions taken by authors in the last quarter-century and ultimately assess its post-ironic form neither as the great white hope of an ailing literary culture nor an unwitting literary accomplice of neoliberalism, but as a work that provides context to the specific moment I'm homing in on and allows for the injection of Kornbluh's theories on Victorian realism into more contemporary novels.

Smith writes in her acknowledgments that it "should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of E. M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or another," and pays her formal respects via culture wars and the legacy of a valuable item. Wallace and Konstantinou both write about self-consciousness, with Wallace associating it with ubiquitous, metafictional irony and Konstantinou associating it with Adam Kelly and New Sincerity. So, while postmodern writers were ironic and self-conscious, post-postmodern authors had to be something else despite a self-consciousness that wasn't going anywhere. Zadie Smith acknowledging Forster so openly, then, may be one way of "negotiating the problem of coordinating inner and outer states," (Konstantinou).<sup>4</sup>

Smith's third novel is only loosely based on *Howard's End*, however, with what Lourdes Lopez-Ropero calls "her strongest formal departure," from Forster coming via the additional campus novel form (13). It's this form that presents the setting for the primary conflict: the secular, liberal patriarch of the Belsey family and his ideological battle with fellow Wellington College professor and Rembrandt scholar, the Moral Majority-conservative Monty Kipps. For Ropero, Howard's "deconstructionist drive" toward Rembrandt (satirized by his family and

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<sup>4</sup> In his 1997 interview with Charlie Rose, David Foster Wallace mentions that postmodern authors were one of the first generations of authors who were educated in criticism. So, if postmodernists had read critics and theorists complicating traditional ideas of authorship and influence (such as Barthes and Bloom) and written accordingly, I would argue that Zadie Smith's blatant homage might be viewed as a product of having read Barthes and Bloom as well as the postmodernists (who had also read Barthes and Bloom).

unhelpful to his career) and Monty's "more conventional take" (which benefits him professionally) are equally to blame for what she says is Smith's "bleak" representation of the University in *On Beauty*, which she classifies as an "academic satire," (13-14). Patrick Herald also zeroes in on Howard's relationship to the institution of Wellington. According to Herald, many of Howard's institutional shortcomings can be analyzed through Stefan Collini's conceptualization of a divide between academics and the 'non-specialist' public. The insufferable erudition of Howard's course on Rembrandt, his alienation of otherwise eager students, and his losing battle on behalf of affirmative action all stem from what Herald says David Foster Wallace called "probably the most dangerous thing about an academic education," namely, that it enables intellectuals to over-analyze at the expense of what is happening in front of and inside them.

These analyses are helpful in beginning to connect Howard to Kornbluh's anarcho-vitalist type but tend to conflate Smith's portraits and satires of professors within the university with the institutions of universities themselves, which could lead to readings of Howard as a straightforward caricature of the institution's oppressive effects. Herald does counter the "easy" conclusion "that Smith wholly derides... academic life," but must move outside of the novel to do so, citing an interview in which the author instead vociferously defends academic institutions (610). Kornbluh's notions of literary realism as being capable of "radical synchronic thinking,"—described as instantaneously representing "what exists and what could be,"—help to interrogate Howard's character more thoroughly, evincing Smith's isolation of content rather than form as the target of satire.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kornbluh puts forward this ability of the realist novel in comparison to *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, which she says mistakenly gives the universal, unsolvable problem of social antagonism a particular answer in the overthrow of the private property-based regime.

*On Beauty*'s narrator describes the fallout of Howard's first affair through Claire Malcolm. Howard's choice (if it can be called that) of mistress and her privileged perspective on the ordeal is crucial to Howard's unique position with regards to institutions, forms, antagonism, and synchronic thinking. Claire's work at Wellington is opposite that of Howard: she is the creative poet attempting to incorporate outside forms into the university—ultimately problematic in its own right—while he is a jaded academic and “aesthetic nihili[st],” (according to Adam Kirsch). Given Howard's oft-noted propensity to only think about himself, his infidelity itself should not come as a surprise, but its motivation, setting, and extra-marital participant help to consider the act on Kornbluh's terms.

Claire, one of Howard's oldest friends, believes his adulterous impulse towards her to be sanctioned by the ideas, differing in temporality, of “living other lives,” and “being young again,” (Smith 224). The abstraction of other lives might provide a nod towards the future, but only insofar as it parallels Howard's liberal ideology, which should not be mistaken for an overall concern with the future and the possibilities of new, constructive forms of life. Howard, in his marriage and in his work, is often negative, iconoclastic, and destructive. Kornbluh might say that he “work[s] against abstractions,” and “impugn[s] grand narratives,” (1). He faces the consequences of his destitency, as Claire recognizes that Howard has no faculties for “dealing with his new reality,” after the affair is found out (Smith 226).

So, in multiple ways, Howard is an example of Kornbluh's anarcho-vitalist. Still, just as “humans cannot exist without forms that scaffold sociability,” Howard and his destructive tendencies (in both theory and practice) cannot exist without the form that Wellington provides (Kornbluh 5). Thus, his rendezvous with Claire is spatialized and formalized distinctly according to the aesthetics of the university: “[I]n the regular course of their college business, their thrice-



weekly after-hours meeting in Howard's office, they would lock the door and gravitate to his huge squishy sofa, upholstered in its ostentatiously English, William Morris ferns," (Smith 224). Given Howard's relationship to Wellington (not to mention the amount of times Foucault shows up explicitly in the narrative), the evidence for a reading of Howard and *On Beauty* as satirizing the university seems ample. Kornbluh's discussion of antagonism and synchrony deepens an understanding of Howard not as intent on destruction in all aspects of his life, but as misguided in his applications of Kornbluh's concepts.

The positive effects of the form of the institution on Howard's relationships and his basic, misapplied understandings of productive, universal antagonism are present in *On Beauty* if relegated to particular aspects of his life. During a gathering at the Belsey home to celebrate the couples' anniversary, Kiki appreciates from afar her husband's social gifts as he speaks to his professional colleagues:

He was listening – but really listening. It's amazing, thought, Kiki how attentive he can be when he puts his mind to it. In his efforts to make peace with her, Howard had spent months showering some of this attention on Kiki herself, and she knew all about the warmth it afforded, the flattering bliss of it (Smith 97).

Later, as Howard walks the streets of Cricklewood, he contemplates his pseudo- "working-class roots," and their importance to his occupational persona "at Marxist conferences and in print," (Smith 292). He ultimately arrives at his father's house, noting his disappointment in the "the unchanging details," and taking a postcard's long-standing position on the mantelpiece to be a sign of how circumscribed his father's life must have become (Smith 293). Both Howard's unique charm in listening and his conflation of the space surrounding Cricklewood with the stagnant quality of reality within are associated strictly with his profession within the institution

of Wellington. He is able to thrive in organized social gatherings in a way that transcends his professional persona, which affects other aspects of his life such as his marriage. Howard is also hypocritical in his identification of the need for an antagonism that produces new realities in places like Cricklewood, but only insofar as it reinforces his self-righteousness and complacency in his own life.

We might also point to Howard's reaction to glee clubs at social events and Mozart at Carlene Kipps' funeral as evidence that his character provides a Kornbluh-esque lesson in castigating content rather than form. He is a deconstructionist—an 'aesthetic nihilist'—and is still susceptible to an attack of affect during a glee club performance of a U2 song or a Cambridge choir rendition of "Ave Verum," which he hates. This latter example is especially interesting given the narration of Kiki's thoughts on Carlene's church. Her first reaction to the chapel's "unsurpassable ugliness," is indignation that Monty would try to prove he is a man of the people "at his wife's expense," (Smith 285). This "typically Belseyian opinion," however, soon gives way to something different, which is worth quoting at length:

Had she become unable to recognize real emotion when it was right in front of her? Here were simple people who loved their God, here was a church that wished to make its parishioners comfortable, here was an honest man who loved his wife – were these things really beneath consideration? (286).

These considerations, especially the one regarding the abstract affects the formal features of the funeral and the space of the church produce on the people within it, are the same kinds of considerations that Howard refuses to directly reckon with in aesthetics as well as life. They exact their revenge on him, forcing him to leave the funeral in what everyone believes to be another one of his selfish and unsympathetic ('typically Belseyian') maneuvers.

Howard's complicated and unique connection to Wellington, aesthetics, and relationships puts in check a simplified, form-denying analysis of *On Beauty's* stifling institutional effects on sociality, showcasing instead the vitality of form to social, professional, and personal reality. The issue with Howard, then, even apart from his truly deconstructive aesthetic theories, lies in the tension between his antagonistic impulses and his complete failure to mimic the ability of literary realism to think in the radically synchronic way *The Order of Forms* extols.

If Howard can be tentatively taken to be representative of Kornbluh's anarcho-vitalist, Katie, a sixteen-year-old freshman who Smith formally affords "a section written from [her] point of view... something denied characters like Vee and Monty," may be read as his budding political formalist equivalent (Herald 608). Katie's imagination and approach to art may appear starry-eyed (she considers Picasso and Rembrandt to be the first and second most amazing human beings she has ever come across), but only in comparison to Howard's destructive cynicism. Smith writes that Katie "used to dream about one day attending a college class about Rembrandt with other intelligent people," but becomes dejected after attending just a few of Howard's lectures (250). Katie tries to prepare for the next class by thinking deeply and taking notes on the Rembrandt works that are to be discussed. Her analysis of *Seated Nude*, a 1631 etching, solidifies her not so much as some kind of nascent post-critical adversary of Howard, but a political formalist whose constructive, able to be "moved by the crenulated marks of absent stockings on her legs," speculate on "that loose belly that has known many babies, that still fresh face that has lured men in the past and may yet lure more," and "see her own body contained," in the etching (Smith 251).

Katie, who Kornbluh might say Smith uses to practice the kind of "thinking that the" (campus novel) "form enables," mirrors Howard in that her approach to aesthetics also applies to

her life (73). In a micro, practical example of the way this works for Katie—the way it may work for readers—the character affirms the campus novel form and the institution itself, while keeping in mind “the constructedness of reality” and its liberation from “putatively organic origins,” (Kornbluh 73). In deciding where to attend college, Katie goes against what would “have made more sense,” to study at Wellington—still remaining unsure as to whether she will eventually be an Art History or English major, or whether she’ll run a gallery or write a book on Picasso (Smith 249). Katie’s focus on the future helps flaunt the politically formalist principle of construction among arbitrariness and contingency; she is able to consider things as they are as well as how they might be in a way that Howard cannot. Whether she studies English or Art, runs a gallery or writes a book, doesn’t matter as much as her relentless commitment to planning.

Katie’s politically formalist optimism running into her professor’s anarcho-vitalism is a clear tragedy of the novel, especially given its unique formal preference in narration that isn’t equally applied to more present characters, but it is also a lesson that helps shake readers out of what otherwise might be a bleak reading of institutional academia. Despite the attitudes and ideologies of Wellington staff, there remains student like Katie who are ready to embrace the university form and let it set the stage for the kinds of constructive criticism. This section shows readers—many of whom are likely familiar with this academic disillusion—that the way things are is not the way things always must be and points to remaining true to arbitrary form while constantly questioning content as way out of Howard-ism and towards something more like Katie-ism.

Another formal component of the portion of the novel concerned with Katie is the questions posed by the third-person narrator, which hearken back to ideas on post-postmodern novels promoting ethea of contingent beliefs. Once, as Katie’s life decisions and openness to

futurity are outlined, and once as Katie is interpreting *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1658, the narrator asks if something makes sense. This not only calls to mind the kind of voice a sixteen-year-old university freshman might speak in but reminds readers of the narrator's presence in a way that makes clear both the knowledge that realist language is not grounded in perfect mimetics and the post-ironic concern with the appearance of sincerity. It promotes an ethos of belief in Katie and her methods by stressing the importance that the reader understands and provides a kind of metafictional guide on interacting with aesthetics in a way that, as I've argued, is relevant to Kornbluh's conception of political formalism. Even as much more attention is given to Howard (which may be reflective of anarcho-vitalism's dominance), Katie is a tool through which Smith promotes an ethos of belief through a blueprint for constructive and forward-thinking critical engagement.

What should additionally be noted is that, for as much preference as the Katie-type is given in the novel, there is a notable distance between herself and the narrator. If someone like Katie was to eventually write a novel like *On Beauty*, she would have to transform not from an ironist to a realist, but from an idealist to a character type like the one Konstantinou finally prescribes in his conclusion to *Cool Characters*, one with "an ironic understanding of [her] own countercultural inheritance," and a "nonironic commitment to learning how to build enduring institutions," (288). Smith's novel is more a meta-survey and guide for action in a specific moment of compounding political and aesthetic discourses than an attempt to recreate for the contemporary moment the features of what Forster admired in works of the past. While far from a contemporary actualization of the subversive status retroactively granted to previous countercultures, *On Beauty*'s maximal navigation of form, irony, and aesthetic engagement

through institution-affirming methods makes it relevant to the political contours of contemporary criticism.

The material that leads Konstantinou to conclude that *On Beauty* is Postironic Bildungsroman “to the degree that the reader is positioned to consider and then reject postmodern irony,” is clearly present in the novel. Still, this reading of the novel risks making a similar mistake to readings that could paradoxically also read the novel as a satire of academic institutions that stymie the education and potential of students like Katie. Smith utilizing a realist form and making an explicit Forster homage does not automatically preclude an ironic disposition or worldview. It may be true that the Postironic Bildungsroman is the most dominant of the modes of post-ironic literature—and the political implications of writing in this mode may be specifically ambiguous (à la *The Corrections*)—but *On Beauty*, neither a simple satire nor an attempt to revive the corpse of a completely outmoded realist form, is still relevant to the priorities of constructive aesthetic and political commitments.

Another element of *On Beauty* making it relevant to politics and literature in the twenty-first century is Smith’s exploration of the forms abstractions take when they are institutionalized. Indeed, this is the dialectical conflict at the center of the novel, with Howard problematizing the left-wing reliance on the postmodern theories that threaten to deprive aesthetics of their transcendent qualities and Monty representing the seemingly attractive alternative in which beautiful indulgence includes the baggage of a meta-narrativity (religion, in Monty’s case) not able to be taken seriously. Whether we buy into the idea that professors like Howard force students like Katie to choose between burned-out cynicism and reactionary simplicity, these dynamics will be important to the other works considered here, despite occupying different spaces on the post-ironic spectrum.

### **Freedom and Struggle: Reification in *Apex Hides the Hurt***

In the final chapter of *Cool Characters*, Konstantinou writes that coolhunters, which he figures as a post-ironic type that takes shape “in response to the existential problems of a cultural economy operating under neoliberal policies and global disruptions of labor,” maintain a “schizoid” relationship to “the concept of authenticity,” as a result of having both to interpret culture and dissociate from it (269). This type of hectic, liminal relationship comes to define Colson Whitehead’s 2006 novel *Apex Hides the Hurt*, in which a ‘nomenclature consultant,’ (whose own name readers are not privy to) is dispatched to consult and rename the fictional town of Winthrop as it experiences an identity crisis. The protagonist mediates the incompatible wishes of the tripartite city council, made up of near-allegorical representatives of industrial capitalism, the New Economy, and a dominant style of symbolic political representation. A relative of the man who co-opted the town and established it as a barbed-wire manufacturing center, a software tycoon, and the mayor/descendant of the recently freed slaves who’d originally founded the town, lobby for the name to remain Winthrop, be changed to New Prospera, and return to its original name of Freedom, respectively.

One way into *Apex Hides the Hurt*—the work of my cluster most closely representing what might be called a traditionally postmodern form of literature—goes through an oft-cited figure in literary discourses attending to postmodernism’s alleged waning influence. Adam Kelly dubs the cultural mode David Foster Wallace aspired to ‘New Sincerity’: an anxious style of writing concerned with intersubjectivity that is associated but not entirely synonymous with conceptions of post-postmodernism or post-irony as a whole. Kelly makes an interesting starting point as he writes that understanding the work of Whitehead (as well as others such as Zadie

Smith and Tom McCarthy [!]) relies on a “reckoning with Wallace’s impact on contemporary writing,” and the ways authors have written in the wake of “the affective quality of his fiction,” and its “technical brilliance.” In the same essay, Kelly cites *Apex* in a list of works that portray subjects acting separately from intentions.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Kelly writes in more depth about Whitehead’s novels, celebrating *The Underground Railroad* for exploring the notion of freedom more sincerely than *Apex* in which Whitehead performs “postmodern work on language,” and treats freedom ironically.

The bad news is that Kelly’s contributions do little to simplify the conversation of *Apex Hides the Hurt*, aesthetic form, and politics at the nexus of a time defined by post-9/11 globalism and postmodernism’s either fully realized beginning or final termination. The good news (for my project, at least) is that his work offers plenty of context, strategies, and apparent contradictions. For instance, consider:

Even if one were somehow to achieve sincerity, would this necessarily be a good thing? Would sincerity’s effects always be good? And can good intentions ever be fully divorced from the consequences of actions? New Sincerity fiction is defined by the way it raises and scrutinizes questions like these, not by the way it answers them in support of the imagined sincerity of the author.

Not only does this outlining of the parameters of New Sincerity fiction potentially allow for the inclusion of *Apex*, which engages explicitly with questions of authenticity and sincerity, it seemingly flies in the face of other accounts of what defines the genre.<sup>7</sup> In one essay, Kelly asks

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<sup>6</sup> Kelly’s argument here is that, through the “common motif of evacuating conscious intention from the subject who acts,” these works engage with the role that he figures for New Sincerity readers; a “critical role that struggles to establish the historical distance from neoliberal norms that the texts themselves find so hard to imagine.”

<sup>7</sup> For Konstantinou, New Sincerity literature (especially in the cases of Wallace and Eggers) is concerned maybe not with answering the questions Kelly asks, but at least exploring them in ways that do *directly* support the sincerity of the author.



the questions that New Sincerity fiction (and *Apex*) attend to and includes *Apex* in a list of novels employing the New Sincerity motif of the eviction of intention. In another, he's more dismissive of the work that Whitehead undertakes in his third novel, fancying it more PoMo, taking stock of it more specifically in the context of the second Bush Administration's response to 9/11, and reserving the word 'sincerity,' exclusively for *The Underground Railroad*, published a decade later.<sup>8</sup>

In ultimately using *Apex* as an example of a timely deployment of irony than has been superseded by more sincere and politically potent forms of literature, Kelly may be said to be arguing that the novel fails to achieve the level of critique, which Kornbluh profiles in her essay "We Have Never Been Critical," as she proposes critical attention to literature not as an object of knowledge but rather a mode of knowing language, possibility, and sociality. While it's possible for novels to fail at critique, it can also be true that overlooking *Apex* risks reducing the novel "to the univocity of discourse," (Kornbluh 401). Attending to *Apex Hides the Hurt* in the context of its dismissal on the grounds of old hat PoMo aesthetics as well as its engagement in New Sincerity conversations allows us to resuscitate its political potential (as Tabone and Ramsey have done) and consider its imminent critique through its plurivocity, estrangement, and futurism.

Plenty of critics have given a passing glance to one of *Apex Hides the Hurt*'s central ironies (the nameless protagonist's career as a mogul of the nomenclature industry), but the forms of confusion this logic produces in the narrative and who that confusion does and doesn't apply to is less documented. The irony pairs with a close third-person narration to disorienting effect noticeable even in the first scenes of the novel. When the nomenclature consultant first

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<sup>8</sup> The narrative of Konstantinou's Postironic Bildungsroman is here applied to the trajectory of Whitehead's entire literary career.

meets with mayor Regina Goode and software CEO Lucky Aberdeen, for instance, readers are given a stark example of this disorientation in action. The narrator describes Regina's approach in the protagonist's typical style of reading the people he meets:

She smiled to the bartender and approached in dignified business strides: Regina Goode, the mayor of the village. He reconsidered: maybe it wasn't a business stride and power charge, but the walk of someone who had recently lost weight and was feeling the confidence of her new body (Whitehead 15).

Compare the stable shift from Regina's action to the protagonist's assessment of her action ('she smiled... he reconsidered') to a similar evaluation of Lucky a paragraph later:

The white guy was Lucky Aberdeen, founder and CEO of Aberdeen Software, and he came in his costume... The jeans and polo shirt were standard issue, but the vest was the thing... He learned later that people in town called it his Indian Vest (Whitehead 15).

And later, as the protagonist visits Albie Winthrop, now-destitute heir to a barbed wire fortune, descendant of the town's co-opters, and owner of the hotel the protagonist stays in (which is also hosting businesspeople on Lucky's corporate retreat):

They started back down the stairs. "You should rent out some rooms," he offered. Sympathy did not come easy to him, but he knew a fellow patient when he saw one. He had his misfortune, and Albie had his.

"That's what the hotel is for," Albie said. "At least I still have that." He grimaced.

"We're all booked this weekend, every room. For *him*. Even when I'm making

money off him for a change, he's making ten times more offa me, what Lucky'll get out of this conference in the long run (Whitehead 72).<sup>9</sup>

While the close third narrative form ultimately clues us in often, the relentless third-person pronouns threaten constantly to destabilize the knowledge of who is doing and reacting to what. This is one of multiple blink-and-you-might-miss-it formal elements of the novel and, as we will see, has unique consequences that help illuminate Whitehead's nuanced interaction with certain transcendent concepts that Wallace might celebrate for their single-entendre-ness.<sup>10</sup>

These transcendent concepts are the same ones that help make up the metanarratives that Kelly believes Whitehead to be eschewing in *Apex Hides the Hurt* (at the expense of substantive politics) and taking up more sincerely in *The Underground Railroad*. To be sure, the matter at hand is not to argue that one novel or the other offers a more viable, less culpable political aesthetic, but rather to consider *Apex* in ways that don't dismiss and simplify its formal interventions or celebrate it only for its masterful piercing of the veil of false, capitalist utopias (Tabone). The disorienting effects of *Apex*'s form have been established, but what do these effects do beyond aiding Whitehead in his apparent mission to de-familiarize neoliberal economies and cultures? For one, the reluctance to make more distinct which characters are acting and which are reacting (because of Whitehead's heavy reliance on the 'he' pronoun) draws attention more heavily to the female characters, through whom Whitehead navigates some of the novel's most subtle critiques.

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<sup>9</sup> The italics are present in the original but draw additional formal attention to the confusion of third person pronouns happening between Lucky, Albie, and the consultant. Here, Lucky is mentioned in the third person before his name is said.

<sup>10</sup> These novel's quickness is also often noticeable at the sentence level through free indirect discourse, such as when Whitehead writes of the protagonist's ongoing feud with the housekeeper of the hotel he's staying in: "Masterstroke here was to use her as she was using him: as scapegoat and punching bag for unruly stuff best undirected, for now, at the true targets," (102). The protagonist/narrator is often a model neoliberal subject in the ways he calculates and writes 'scripts' as he socializes, but moments like this let readers know that Whitehead and his protagonist understand the unsustainability of systems that proffer forms of life subjected wholly to market logics.

It stands to reason, then, that Albie Winthrop, Lucky Aberdeen, and the protagonist/narrator are male characters. Whitehead could have easily used a female character as the face of the emerging economy defined by attitudes of “frontier liberalism and laid-back tech-culture trendiness,” especially given that money-making multiculturalism and commodified diversity are some of the novel’s most explicit targets. It’s additionally easy to imagine Regina’s character being a male descendent of the town’s founder with no real consequences. Even outside of the secondary characters we might imagine Whitehead using a female protagonist as he did in his debut novel. Without a conversation of who the narrative form serves to lambaste and who it serves not exactly to champion, but at least to critique more seriously, any of these options may appear to be just as well. Instead, Regina is given a space of her own, while the associations between the male characters of Albie, Lucky, and the protagonist are made clear. After all, even though the protagonist has managed to find some level of defamiliarization in light of his infected toe and time off work (which is compounded through moments of narrative irony and cynicism), his socioeconomic position is closer to Lucky’s than it is transcendent (this is why Albie is so paranoid about whether he’ll be given a fair shake by the nomenclature consultant).<sup>11</sup> Whitehead gives readers three parties (all complicit to different degrees) in Albie, Lucky, and the jaded consultant: a father, son, and budding problem child in the familial history of capitalism, while Regina navigates a different kind of space.

Importantly, the space that Regina navigates is not one of simple resistance. Her politics, to what extent she’s even given substantive politics, are far from political blueprints for standing up to the inevitabilities of Lucky Aberdeen and the ontological order he represents. Still, she asks questions that are given a far more sincere treatment than those of Albie. During his meeting

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<sup>11</sup> In a more cynical novel, Regina, Lucky, and the protagonist would all be on the same page with regards to the New Prospera name.

with Albie, hilariously portrayed as a pathetic has-been (“privilege gone soft in its own juices”) grasping at the straws of tradition, the narrator dismissively and without thinking tells Albie that he “can’t stop progress,” to which Albie agrees teary-eyed (Whitehead 82). In a similar conversation with Regina, the mayor tries to offer an answer, even if it is ultimately misguided:

Can you argue with Lucky, really? Can you argue with prosperity? Can you protest change? It’s jobs, money for the town, money for the ‘infrastructure.’... How can you fight a word like *infrastructure*?... You fight it by saying: No... I have a choice. And I choose the truth. (Whitehead 116).

The formal emphasis given to Regina and the active role she takes in fighting the apparent common sense of neoliberalism’s brand of progress privilege her role in the attempts to decide how best to move forward. She’s asking the right questions and providing answers that speak to the novel’s central symbolism. Regina, for her part, is not trying to hide the hurt as do the brand of bandages that the protagonist dubbed Apex.

Although the nomenclature consultant does not choose Regina’s proposed name in the end, the paying of formal respects that the novel performs with regards to Regina’s character and her proposal lends credence to an argument that Whitehead is not treating freedom quite as ironically as Adam Kelly believes he is. The consultant is clearly guilty of this and notes early on that “Freedom was so defiantly unimaginative as to approach a kind of moral weakness,” but the novel overall does not strike it down to the same extent as it does Winthrop and New Prospera (83). The narrator is even later shown to soften to Regina’s conviction. Briefly bringing Kornbluh and Konstantinou back into the fold with regards to Kelly’s argument and the end of the novel will help drive home the relationship between metanarratives, reification, and political action outside of conceptions of the novel as outmoded or only useful for its diagnostic capacity.

Adam Kelly believes Whitehead's division between the concepts of freedom and struggle are unsustainable because "freedom depends on struggle and struggle on freedom," (not sure). Kornbluh, meanwhile, helps us to understand why a dismissal on these grounds may be dubious. She writes that, for Giorgio Agamben and others, 'freedom' means nothing more than destituent play, deforming and unforming, ceaseless tearing down. So, against readings of *Apex Hides the Hurt* that might focus on Whitehead's masterful deconstruction of sociality under neoliberal forms of government and life, seeing Lucky's common-sense notion of progress and Regina's platitudes as equally constraining and violent, it is important to think further about how form is working to construct a more nuanced politics. As we've already seen, the form of the novel's narration serves to treat Regina (and therefore freedom) more carefully than it may seem at the level of content, and certainly more carefully than it does Lucky, Albie, and often its own protagonist.<sup>12</sup>

The nomenclature consultant falls predictably short at the end of the novel, but his decision still represents a profound political truth that more recent political developments in America have not made any less relevant to a society still imbricated with ontological economic constructions and post-ironic cultural ones. Whitehead's protagonist, affective laborer par excellence, knows the contours of his interesting position. He is not able to interact in meaningful ways with characters like the bartender or the housekeeper (characters outside of the Black Bourgeois) and therefore cannot fully rid himself of the persistent pain he feels in his foot. He very much resembles the post-ironic cool-hunting characters that Konstantinou identifies in Jennifer Egan and William Gibson novels. These characters parallel the novelists themselves, who worry to different degrees about branding and auto-reification. But where Egan and her

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<sup>12</sup> This is the opposite of what Rachel Greenwald Smith sees happening in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, which takes content-level jabs at neoliberal landmarks such as the North American Free Trade Agreement while remaining formally unquestioning of the fundamentals of neoliberalism.

characters might obscure “the economic exploitation undergirding corporate power,” by emphasizing individual choices over the systems influencing those choices, *Apex*’s protagonist gets closer to squaring the circle (Konstantinou 269).

Rather than continuing to produce brand names that hide the hurt and actively doing the thing that novelists writing in the wake of postmodernism and the onset of post-irony were so anxious about doing, the consultant moves outside of the spheres that have historically influenced his projects of reification, which may be tempting to read as the exact violent constraints that inhibit true freedom. In doing so, he achieves a sort of faux radicalism in which his culpability remains burdensome, but he nonetheless makes gains in subverting the expectations of influences including the overtly evil (Lucky), the laughably obsolete (Albie), and even the well-intentioned but misguided (Regina). Regina’s contributions and the formal advantages her character is given should not be quite so simplified, however. Her interest in history and truth are an important component of Whitehead’s political aesthetic and enable the consultant to learn the history of the town in the first place. Regina errs in the same way that Kornbluh argues *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* errs, by threatening to minimize “the universal history of antagonism,” by equating it with specific forms of historical exploitation such as slavery or capitalism (61). The consultant continues to reify and map a cultivated brand onto a diverse community but does so in a way that does not naturalize “the priorities of global capitalism,” and instead connects slavery to capitalism to show that the overcoming of one exploitative obstacle does not represent the overcoming of exploitation as such.

The way that Whitehead handles the connections between historical racial subjugation and modern (or postmodern, or post-postmodern) whitewashed exploitation is what Kelly identifies as ultimately unsustainable. I am arguing that the formal attributes of *Apex*, as they

pertain to the metanarrative of freedom, help the novel to make use of its ironic form in ways that both deconstruct false utopias and outline the foundations of utopias more just. (After all, part of Lucky's mantra—"Dreaming is a cinch..."—overtly aims to wipe away the difficulties of imagination that have to be attended to in any worthwhile conception of spaces for human life.) The nonlinear narrative works similarly, as the story moves back and forth between recounting the consultant's rise to industry stardom, infected stubbed toe, and hospitalization and dealing with his time navigating Winthrop. This disrupts what readers might expect from novels with similar elements; instead of traveling through adversity, disillusionment, and cynical irony before triumphantly getting back in the saddle and engaging with work more authentically, the novel begins with the getting back in the saddle and tells both stories in tandem. The novel's oscillating temporality reinforces the importance of struggle, denying identification in the narrator's personal development (therefore also eschewing the affective hypothesis Rachel Greenwald Smith takes aim at). There is no quest and there is no real coming out on the other side of something. Lessons might be learned, and events might happen as consequences of other events, but the novel's formal logic refutes a reading that celebrates these lessons and consequences in ways that reinforce traditional narratives of the calculative, neoliberal subjectivity (that the consultant embodies at other times) or conceptualizes utopias as ontologically synonymous with 'Apex' and 'Freedom,' instead of constitutively rooted in universal struggle. *Apex* deserves recognition for its response and critiques of the overlapping and complex discourses of irony, postmodernity, and neoliberalism and its addition of the "unexpected political insights," of post-ironic branding to these discourses (Konstantinou 288).

In concluding a mediation on *Apex Hides the Hurt* that attempts to save the novel from certain grounds of comparative dismissal, it is useful to look at another reading of *The*



*Underground Railroad*, sketched in Kornbluh's previously referenced essay "We Have Never Been Critical." This reading ignores the 'sincere' treatment of meta-narrativity and politics that Kelly solely sees *The Underground Railroad* performing in favor of one suggesting that the two Whitehead novels are far more analogous in their interventions. Kornbluh concludes that *The Underground Railroad* succeeds in reaching the level of critique and that its "core trope of literalizing the historical metaphor of the underground railroad into actual infrastructure... insistently connects labor and struggle," (406). Later, she continues: "the labor of struggle, the work to survive against the work of the nation, is not historical fiction in the past but searingly ongoing reality in the present," (406). This reading bolsters an account of *Apex Hides the Hurt* as going beyond "postmodern work on language," and instead being an example of fiction that complicates the dominant narrative of irony's bygone salad days of profound political importance and current ineptitude.

We might now think more about Whitehead's place on Konstantinou's post-ironic map. It is tempting to try to make the novel fit snugly into the 'Motivated Postmodernism' classification (this might be what Adam Kelly is doing) but, as I've argued, *Apex Hides the Hurt* does not evacuate "challenge[s] to existing reality or dominant modes of perception," (Konstantinou 92).

Something about how it engages with the same stuff as *On Beauty*

### **Ecological Demands of *Remainder***

Zadie Smith's famous essay celebrating Tom McCarthy's debut novel for its constructive deconstruction and representation of "an alternate road down which the novel might, with difficulty, travel forward," further complicates any project concerned with untying the knot of

literature, irony, postmodernism, and neoliberal ontology (94). The timeline of irony in the minds of those uncomfortable with inheriting the postmodern theory they cut their teeth on, according to Konstantinou, includes “capitalism’s Cold War victory, individual irony, and philosophical antifoundationalism,” merging into a “single discourse,” (168). History ends and a corrosive irony assumes the position of the last man standing. Zadie Smith, whose exact position with regards to post-irony, New Sincerity, and hysterical realism is exceedingly elusive, sees things differently.<sup>13</sup> According to Smith, the last man isn’t irony at all; instead, the ‘Balzac-Flaubert model’ of literary realism emerges victorious as the “metafiction that stood in opposition to realism,” gets “relegated to a safe corner of literary history,” (74). *Remainder* emerges then not as a challenger to the literature of Barth and Gaddis, as the traditional story goes, but to a literary realism that, while remaining dominant, has been forced to become increasingly paranoid of its own shortcomings.

The first observations we might make of Smith’s recognition of *Remainder*, in which an(other) unnamed protagonist spends settlement money reenacting vague memories of his past as well as events such as shootings, is that it risks closing the door on critiquing the novel on certain political grounds. Not only does it reify genre definitions that may preclude a full understanding of, say, realism’s political formalism à la Kornbluh, it only takes us so far in describing the novel’s accomplishments.<sup>14</sup> For example, Smith accounts for the novel’s reveling in the persistence of matter to carry death with it and leave marks, but stops short of answering the questions that a work which recognizes “space as a nonneutral thing,” asks (96). These are the questions that can help decide whether a work such as *Remainder* is employing formal

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<sup>13</sup> Critics call attention to Smith’s use of different forms of writing across her oeuvre. *White Teeth* has been famously described as hysterically realist, with other works such as *The Autograph Man* and *NW* making more use of postmodern forms and *On Beauty*, as we’ve seen, having roots in Victorian realism.

<sup>14</sup> Smith accuses realism of ignoring “the specifics of space,” while Kornbluh believes it to be an important aesthetic tool in mapping social space.

innovation to political ends or whether its technical innovation “echoes... the neoliberal commitment to entrepreneurialism, individualism, and pragmatism,” (Huehls and Smith 13).

Before attending to what those answers might look like, it is necessary to try and nail down more firmly *Remainder*'s contextual background. Does it present a challenge to literary realism or, as Adam Kelly seems to believe, does it primarily define itself in terms of its relationship to its earlier postmodern predecessors and the effort to transcend irony? I would argue that with the help of Konstantinou's typological essay, we can situate the novel more specifically than Smith does when she associates it generally in the avant-garde mode of Blanchot, Burroughs, and Ballard. Konstantinou tentatively organizes the messy and uneven aesthetic developments of the last quarter century or so into four groups, the last of which he names 'Relational Art.' Art in this category deploys realism and minimalism “in the hope of more directly apprehending an underlying reality that postmodern theories of mediation took to be inaccessible,” often producing feelings of awkwardness (98).

Relational Art, for Konstantinou, includes popular works like Ricky Gervais's *The Office* and draws attention to the gaps between people, failures to communicate, and the tensions of sociality. While lyrical realism has become neurotic in pining for the days of simple symbolism and transcendence, relational art attempts to dialectically lay bare something that realism might obscure and “postmodern theories of mediation,” might dismiss wholesale (Konstantinou 98). Konstantinou is also correct to identify a connection between relational art and new materialisms. This consonance between matter, minimalism, and narrative refusals is clear in the first few pages of *Remainder*. In the first chapter, the tonally disaffected first-person narrator comically vacillates between making material work for him and letting material have its way

with him as he retrieves his train ticket from a broken machine, gets grease on his fingers, steps onto the wrong escalator, and gets more grease on his sleeve. He says:

I have, right to this day, a photographically clear memory of standing on the concourse looking at my stained sleeve, at the grease—this messy, irksome matter that had no respect for millions, didn't know its place. My undoing: matter  
(McCarthy 17).

A clear-enough idea of *Remainder*'s relationship to both postmodern and realist predecessors—insofar as it rejects narrativity, rejoices in matter, and confronts “postmodern reality by means of non-postmodern form,”—emerges through Konstantinou and Smith (Konstantinou 98). This is complicated further, however, by Fredric Jameson's 2015 reassessment of postmodernity, capitalism, and temporality.

Jameson cites *Remainder* directly in “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” using it to advance his notion that singularity, which he pairs with globalization to fashion a new conception of postmodernity, is “a pure present without past or future.” In the novel, the ‘memories’ that return to the protagonist are relentlessly reconstructed and turned into events. These events are what Jameson sees as defining ‘new art,’ works of which can no longer be considered objects. Instead of being objects with posterity, singular events are made for the pure present. Jameson identifies something different, then, in *Remainder*'s form than Smith does, or Konstantinou might. According to Jameson, these forms of art are not reusable. Once the form and content is consumed together—once the idea of the work is consumed—the trick is over and the device is thrown away.

These means of consideration trouble ideas on the form and politics of contemporary literature. If readers should be looking to literature for future-based affirmations of form, what

does it mean for a novel like *Remainder* to only to nod to the future insofar as it differs from the ‘Balzac-Flaubert’ model, especially if that model is exactly where critics like Kornbluh think realism’s ontological futurity is most distinct? The throwaway form that Jameson sees in *Remainder* comes to resemble what Konstantinou recognizes as the “dominant neoliberal cultural unit,” which counterintuitively is not the individual, but a contingent, “project-based,” team (101).<sup>15</sup> What makes this comparison so dizzying, though, is the level to which *Remainder* metafictionally satirizes this exact neoliberal logic.

Zadie Smith flirts with the idea that *Remainder* wants to “kill the novel stone dead,” (94). At certain points, novel writing—with evidence provided by the New Sincerity engagement with gift anxiety and Anna Kornbluh’s architecture metaphors—does appear to approach a kind of self-centered tyranny for Tom McCarthy.<sup>16</sup> Even as his protagonist allows the process of finding his building (which involves a great deal of hunters employed by the firm he’s hired to help him reconstruct his life) to go on, he understands that it will not be his building unless he finds it himself. Later, once construction starts and many moving parts are involved, he reflects:

What was lacking, if anything, was comprehension: making them understand exactly what it was that was required of them. And making them understand at the same time how little they needed to understand. I didn’t need to make them share

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<sup>15</sup> Rachel Greenwald Smith provides additional evidence for this conception in discussing the differences between classically liberal and neoliberal conceptions of self-improvement. While classical liberalism focused on the individual growing out of and separating themselves from structures and associations, neoliberal subjects are figured as the outcomes of “investments and returns,” that often find it necessary to form “strategic alliances with others,” (37-38).

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy’s participation in the conversation of gifts that obsessed writers like Wallace deserves and is given more attention above, but the project of building that is his first reenactment additionally must be attached to Kornbluh’s narrative of how realism has worked traditionally. For Henry James, Kornbluh writes, “realism works architecturally because it projects coherent spaces independent of preexisting spaces... it evinces a formalistic regard for world-making,” (33). McCarthy’s protagonist commits a faux pas like the one McCarthy teases he might himself be committing: namely, the use of immeasurable resources to create something for purely individual purposes. The building of a space not for future configurations of sociality, but for the false mimesis of previous, discrete socialities.

my vision and I didn't want to. Why should they? It was my vision, and I was the one with the money (113).

Especially if we are to read Tom McCarthy with David Foster Wallace in mind, it's difficult not to read this tongue-in-cheek passage in the context of the New Sincerity anxiety surrounding 'Gift Aesthetics.' Adam Kelly cites Zadie Smith and Jacques Derrida along with Wallace in stressing the importance (and potential impossibility) of gifts and intersubjectivity in the New Sincerity aesthetic. McCarthy appears to be sardonically weighing in and drawing attention to the gap between himself and his readers, giving them tacit permission to continue with the reading comprehension charade even though the work is only in the service of his own dialectically materialist vision.

McCarthy's refusal to perceive himself as the giver of a gift (however anxious he may be with that position) connecting himself to readers in recognizable ways represents, whether he likes it or not, more than an attempt to either assassinate the novel or expose it as a self-centered literary corollary to the International Necronautical Society's manifesto.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, *Remainder*'s power comes from what is left over when its author decides on one hand not to employ a lyrically realist form with its sights set on transcendence (as Smith says authors like Joseph O'Neill uneasily do) and, on the other, to erase the possibility that this formal innovation paves the way for an established emotional connection between writer and reader (as post-ironic juggernauts like Wallace and Eggers have been accused of doing). Smith draws attention to the fact that *Remainder*'s narrator rarely lets readers know how things feel. Instead, I'll argue that how things feel for the narrator are either too minimalistic and simple for readers to digest in projects of emotional/economic projects of self-improvement ("It was all good,") or too elusive

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<sup>17</sup> The INS, of which McCarthy is the founder and general secretary, is an organization committed to the 'reality,' of gnarly materiality and the realization that "we are all death-marked creatures, defined by matter," (Smith 90).

for these projects, which attempt to reign in and master feelings in the same faulty manner that the narrator tries to use his newfound affluence to domesticate matter (209).

Rachel Greenwald Smith points towards works in *Affect* that stimulate without proffering rigid emotional categories. Of Laird Hunt's *The Exquisite*, she notes that New York in the novel "is both meticulously realized in perfect detail and undeniably strange," (70). A similar dynamic helps describe what makes *Remainder* so tonally uneasy. Even though the narrative reveries of lyrical realism are absent, material reveries of pure logistics are ever-present: "It struck me as I waited that all great enterprises are about logistics. Not genius or inspiration or lights of imagination, skill or cunning, but logistics," (196). The question which should, with difficulty, be addressed, then, is what else *Remainder*'s tonal ambiguity helps to critique, despite the fact that this critique may be taking place at an affective level for which we do not yet have a fully developed vocabulary.

When the *modus operandi* of the current socioeconomic regime is its seemingly relentless ability to co-opt and commodify every site of potential resistance, a statement like the one Greenwald Smith makes when she writes that "the concept of ecology offers perhaps the greatest threat to the central neoliberal tenet that the market is the system that structures and underlies all other systems," should make our ears perk up (102). I will argue that *Remainder*'s affective work happens not as the result of a simple tension between human and non-human actors (narrator versus windshield-wiper fluid), but the unique relationship of neoliberal theory to entire ecologies of human and non-human actors alike. This relationship is one defined by the difficulty of sensitizing readers to systems that complicate the tendency to bottle up and label the world around them without performing that exact function by way of narrativity.<sup>18</sup> McCarthy takes up a

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<sup>18</sup> If paradox and anxiety are inevitable features twenty-first century novels, then the case for *Remainder* might be made on the grounds that, rather than being primarily anxious of metafiction (as contemporary realism is) or

minimalist style and satirical cautionary tale form in navigating this difficulty, resulting in a novel that affectively registers ecologies without attempting to gift specific insights of this registration to readers.

We might now call attention to the formal concerns of *Remainder*, which differ from those of *Apex Hides the Hurt* even as they are both similarly interested in aspects of contemporary culture such as normative reification and marketing at the level of plot. *Remainder*'s formal concerns appear to more closely mimic those that Greenwald Smith identifies in Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker* (published in 2006; one year after Tom McCarthy's novel). One of these is the bifurcated handling of rationality and affect, which are modeled characterologically in *Remainder*. Nazrul Ram Vyas, as much a character as Zadie Smith is a chair (her words), works as another refusal of McCarthy to provide sites of identification in the novel as well as an embodiment of a component of the free market fantasy of streamlined facilitation: plug capital in, easily get whatever you want out. He is characterized—if you can call it that—as a literal computer, whirring going on behind his eyes, thankful even for the opportunity to manage the incredible amount of information the protagonist's outlandish projects require. Our narrator, on the other hand (and especially in his minimalist style), is frequently and mysteriously affected in his reenactments to the point of blackouts and trances.<sup>19</sup>

The significance of this separation is as integral to the significance of literary potential as it is to accounts (only a few of which I've considered here), of how and why the work of authors like Wallace or Eggers might wind up producing alternative rather than oppositional art.

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intersubjective impossibility (as much post-ironic literature is), its anxieties approach ecological opposition in a way that unbothered transcendence or pure, intersubjective identification may not.

<sup>19</sup> Thinking about the narrator in this way also helps to make sense of his frequent complaint of the smell of cordite, which he admits near the end of the novel that he has never actually encountered. In *The Antinomies of Realism* (another work that considers affect as being distinct from recognizable, named emotion), Fredric Jameson identifies senses of smell as sites of affective intensity.



Narratives like these, Greenwald Smith contests, “might be understood to be ineffective not because they are emotionally inadequate but because they too easily package the volatility of affective potential,” (117). There is a fuzzy, hard-to-describe component of affect (potential) as well as the component of how readers and authors organize this antecedent component into action that makes sense to them. In *Remainder*, these components are primarily delegated to different characters, but the narrator still performs actions as he reenacts moments of sociality and crime that he feels drive him closer to authenticity. At the level of content, and even though the separation is often characterological, McCarthy gives examples of the faulty ways affective potential could catalyzed and shaped (with the help of eight and a half million pounds, of course). At the level of form however, novels such as *Remainder* only provide affective potential in techniques that are not easily codified but still, if we are thinking of literature ecologically, produce these fuzzy, hard-to-describe affects in readers as texts are circulated.

We’re able now to take note of how McCarthy utilizes the relational art form of post-irony to formally navigate some of the movement’s most pressing issues. Konstantinou makes clear the post-ironic commit to cultivating belief and the fact that this commitment often either stopped short of advancing specific beliefs or advanced specific beliefs only in the genuine-ness of authors. *Remainder* is similar in its near-total exclusion of anything that could be described as a prescription for living, but additionally manages to produce feelings and states that aren’t easily reified by market logic; you don’t put down *Remainder* feeling like you’ve consumed a commodity or that the labor you’ve performed in reading has paid off in recognizable or satisfactory ways. (At the end of the novel, the narrator reads a headline that reads ‘*Shares Tumble.*’) McCarthy ties the subversion of traditional logics and the frustration that follows to

the power of literature explicitly as the narrator's staff realize that they've just robbed an actual bank instead of model:

I think he understood that I was right. Of course he couldn't go back to the bank.

What would he do? Explain that it had all been a performance? Throw in the stuff about fridge doors and cigarettes and carrots and De Niro for good measure? ... I listened to them for a while, trying to work out the rhythm of the various sounds, the moans and wails and yelps... but gave up after a while. It was too complex to pin down right now; I'd have to get it re-enacted later (297).

Read this way, *Remainder* appears as anything but an attempt to kill the Novel. However, it also goes further than shaking it out of a boring complacency, additionally trying to shake readers out of a complacency by formally producing sites that register the evasive and affective results of novels that perform failures of domination and sensitize readers to extra-market otherness without lyrically obscuring this otherness or otherwise linguistically forcing it to submit to human will.

If I was in the business of comparison and nitpicking, there may be arguments against *Remainder*'s use of the first-person pronoun as not enabling the construction of a point of view transcending that of individuals. Similarly, certain aspects of *Remainder*'s form may be seen as symptomatic of global capitalism, as Jameson points out. Sianne Ngai doesn't reference *Remainder* specifically—and Jameson himself is skeptical of using the word 'gimmick,'—but Ngai's "Theory of the Gimmick," which assesses the gimmick as a distinctly capitalist phenomenon that works both too hard to get our attention and too little as a frivolous labor-saving device may also be involved in evaluating this imbrication. Thus far, my reading of *Remainder* has predominantly utilized Konstantinou and Greenwald Smith. And while this brief

discussion of Jameson and Ngai may set *Remainder* up for failure via Kornbluh's theories, the novel is deeply concerned with literature as something that is anti-mimetic, as is Kornbluh. What it might be accused of lacking in utopianism, I wager it makes up for in its demand to be read ecologically, and therefore the exercise in the consideration of systems that operate outside of those that we have been trained to pay attention to.

### Conclusion

Aesthetic approaches that figure literature as something with the capacity to formally contain pure transcendence, authenticity, subversion, or opposition clearly lack nuance. It is not helpful to consider literature after postmodernism (or at least in the wake of claims of postmodernism's end) as doing the aesthetic work equivalent to the political task of overcoming ontological global capitalism. Still, contemporary literature is incredibly diverse. The works I've surveyed here provide only a small sample, especially as they all in specific ways attempt to hold conversations with the movements they've inherited and potentially worked to usurp. While others continue to do the useful work of description and delineation, I've attempted at large a deeper investigation into the connections of some novels to a contemporary reality marked by apparent inevitability and the pasts that catalyzed both this inevitability and the forms of potential resistance that have been taken up with much struggle.

As my title hints, this project has been primarily about untangling the daunting knot of relationships that some authors have with postmodernism, irony, and politics. Some historical events such as the Cold War and the emergence of leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton are more easily squared away in this project than more recent ones like the September 11 attacks and the Occupy Wall Street movement. Thinking about even more contemporary shifts in

political discourse may help historicize and offer a glimmer of hope and show that the work some literature did in the mid-aughts has not been in vain, whether these works were written specifically in the interest of progressive politics or not. Occupy Wall Street provides a tangible example, for instance. A diverse movement that may have failed in its specific moment to deliver a coherent set of demands nonetheless provided a rallying cry around the ‘99%’ rhetoric that brought discourses regarding income inequality into the mainstream. If the rallying cries of the Occupy movement made politically attuned authors of the mid-aughts anxious for the movement’s legitimacy (think of Whitehead’s nomenclature consultant first considering the name Freedom), some of those anxieties may have now subsided as left-wing politicians rely more heavily on this rhetoric to relative success (Medicare for All, Abolish the Police, the Green New Deal, etc.). Even if the only immediate deliverable of the Occupy Wall Street movement was sloganeering around the ninety-nine and one percent, it would be difficult to argue that left-wing politics (in the United States, at least) is not more fully fleshed out in 2022 than thought possible when *Apex Hides the Hurt*, *On Beauty*, and *Remainder* were published.

Zadie Smith, Colson Whitehead, and Tom McCarthy all engage with the impulse to formally contain aspects of existence through means potentially imbricated with neoliberal logic. The recent shifts in political rhetoric in which concise slogans simply relay anti-capitalist messages may suggest a hopeful trajectory for oppositional aesthetics during a time when the neoliberal façade could be beginning to show signs of stress. Even as some of these movements (such as Black Lives Matter) are metabolized by corporations and market forces, the effectiveness of others in providing rallying cries around coherent platforms and positions points both to ways forward politically and the efficacy of some of the post-ironic involvement in debates about branding, reification, and market logics. This is not to say that anxious authors of

post-ironic literature were wringing their hands at the expense of this type of political messaging (some, to be sure, are more guilty of this than others) but rather that some of these anxieties and processes of thinking through the intersections of literature, irony, and neoliberalism helped pave the way for a politics that does not reflect the core values of capitalism even if it borrows from its tactics and strategies.

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