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## **Grappling with the Aftereffects of Modernism in American Literature and Culture: Spiritual, Political, and Ecological**

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Grappling with the Aftereffects of Modernism in American Literature and Culture: Spiritual,  
Political, and Ecological

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Final Master's Portfolio

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with a Specialization in Literary & Textual Studies

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Dr. Stephannie Gearhart, First Reader  
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## Table of Contents

## Introduction

Analytical Narrative.....	3
“High Beams Only Make Things Worse”: Secular Faith in David Foster Wallace’s “Good Old Neon”	
Essay 1.....	10
“Trudging Through the Ruins and the Relics”: <i>Spring Breakers</i> , <i>Midnight Cowboy</i> and the Expansive Spirit of the Western Under Capitalist Realism	
Essay 2.....	35
“The Shipwreck is Certain”: Richard Powers’ <i>The Overstory</i> as a Roadmap for Resistance in the Era of Globalization-Minus	
Essay 4.....	58
“Between the Modernists and the Medievalists”: Centering Conservatism’s Long-standing Crusade	
Essay 3.....	71

### Analytical Narrative

In 2013, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in English from The Ohio State University. During my time in school, I found myself very drawn toward the idea of a career that involved teaching and writing; however, like many recent college graduates, money was tight. This led me to quickly find a job in the business world—something that bloomed into a short career of six years, while also allowing me to earn an MBA along the way.

Despite the busy nature of my schedule, and the vastly different trajectory I found myself on, my love for literature stayed as strong as ever. I devoured novels in the evenings and on the weekends, while also developing a newfound interest in critical theory—something that was piqued by my studies of economics and globalization in business school. Part of this was due to my recognition that there were gaps within the economic and financial theories I was studying in school. These gaps were not errors, but rather seemed to me to come about through the very narrow scope these fields used to examine the world. In doing so, they left out any sense of a critique of the status quo or an examination of its origins, while also failing to move toward any dream of how things may be different—traits that, as a previous humanities major, I had come to see as necessary aspects to the pursuit of knowledge. I began to wonder how literary critics and philosophers addressed these topics, which eventually introduced me to the field of critical theory. Thus, my new world, in many ways, brought me back to my undergraduate studies, while also allowing me to see them in a new light. Literature became, for me, no longer simply an art form, but also a window into philosophy and the social forces around me. It was this new understanding that encouraged me to finally take the leap I had desired to take for the previous six years—the pursuit of a PhD in English Literature.

This journey began with my decision to craft a writing sample from scratch—one that fully captured my intellectual growth during the several years since my undergraduate studies. I sat up researching and writing in my Chicago apartment, deep into the evenings after work. The essay I ended up writing examined Thomas Pynchon's novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, through Geographer David Harvey's theoretical text, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. I was naturally drawn toward this topic, despite the fact that I had never written anything like it before. After including this new writing sample with my graduate school applications, it became apparent that this decision to follow my own intellectual curiosity had paid off, as I later accepted an offer to attend Bowling Green State University's MA Program in Literary & Textual Studies—an offer that allowed me the chance to return to my roots as a full-time scholar of literature, to gain teaching experience, and to move back to my home state of Ohio.

My research interests, upon entering BGSU's program, centered on the broad topics of post-1945 American Literature, postmodernism, and critical theory. In particular, I was interested in how narrative is both influenced by, and influences, political and economic forces. As I near my graduation from BGSU, I still find myself captivated by these same questions; however, my time in this program has allowed me to bring far greater depth to these topics, while also helping me to realize how they overlap with other theoretical traditions.

From my very first week of graduate seminars, I could already feel myself growing as a thinker. I still clearly remember the in-depth discussion of neoliberalism that took place during the first week of Professor Jolie Sheffer's English 6750 Course on the 1960s in contemporary American culture—a topic that aligned perfectly with my interests. Professor Sheffer's incorporation, throughout the semester, of social movements and politics into discussions of literature helped me to recognize just how expansive the study of literature can be. Her course

also formally introduced me to American Studies and Cultural Studies as academic disciplines.

That same week, I was also told in Professor Piya Pal-Lapinski's English 6010 course, which served as an introduction to graduate research in the humanities, that I would have the freedom to write a conference paper on any topic of my choosing. I quickly navigated toward a piece that I had been thinking over for some time—one that involved a comparative reading of the works of Marilynne Robinson and David Foster Wallace. These experiences from the very first week of class serve to demonstrate two key aspects of BGSU's MA program in Literary & Textual Studies that have made it such a valuable learning experience for me: its focus on interdisciplinary scholarship, and its emphasis on self-directed research.

As my time in this program has progressed, the intellectual freedom to pursue new topics of my choosing, as well as the immense exposure to interdisciplinary scholarship and new theoretical methods, has helped me to better understand the type of scholarship I hope to complete at the PhD level. More specifically, my interests in post-1945 American literature have expanded into an interest in American culture, more broadly, during this timeframe. The shift from the postwar/Fordist economy into the neoliberal era is something that is of particular interest to me. My final essay in Professor Sheffer's course ended up being an analysis of Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, through the lens of this economic and political shift in American culture during the early 1970s. My growing expertise on this topic later led me to analyze the films, *Spring Breakers* and *Midnight Cowboy*, through Mark Fisher's theory of capitalist realism (which he argues to be an intensified version of neoliberal logic) in a seminar paper I wrote for Professor Khani Begum's English 6800 seminar on Alternative and Global Westerns. This paper argues that both of these films should be seen as Westerns, despite their lack of many of the formalistic attributes typically associated with the genre. I have included a revised version of it in

this portfolio. During my revisions, I focused mostly on adding additional details on the coming-of-age film genre under neoliberalism, as well as additional analyses of each film, in order to better contextualize my argument. This essay has been submitted to *the quint: an interdisciplinary quarterly from the north* for potential publication, and I am hopeful it will be accepted soon.

Similarly, my interest in postmodernism, which initially led to my writing the conference paper on David Foster Wallace and Marilynne Robinson in Professor Pal-Lapinski's class, later led me to expand this paper into a far more nuanced and theoretical piece. Literary Theorist, Martin Hagglund's, book, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, played a huge role in helping me to better articulate what I see as Wallace and Robinson's unique critique of postmodernist thought. Kimberly Spallinger's course, English 6060: Thesis and Dissertation Writing, was immensely helpful in guiding me toward a clarified version of this paper's argument—one that better demonstrates the unique intervention it makes into existing research on postmodernism, as well as into the field of Religion and Literature. Ultimately, the process of researching and writing this essay has helped me to see that my interest in postmodernism incorporates not only literature, but also notions of the human self and subjectivity, as well as new forms of spirituality during this era. Professor Gearhart's feedback on this project, as the first reader of my portfolio, has been immensely helpful as well—especially, her notes on unburying certain key aspects to my argument. The immense improvements this piece has seen has made me confident that I will be able to find a great space to publish it as an article. I plan on submitting it to *The Journal of David Foster Wallace Studies* very soon. The initial conference paper that this essay grew out of was accepted by this organization's annual conference, and their

academic journal seems like a similarly great fit for this article. This piece serves as the substantive research piece in my portfolio and is featured as the first essay within this collection.

My initial interest in critical theory, upon entering BGSU's program, has also gone through a similar process of simultaneous expansion and refinement. While I am still very interested in the work of The Frankfurt School, as well as their many successors, such as David Harvey and Fredric Jameson, I have also come to see how these primarily economic modes of critique must be accompanied by other areas of theory, if one is to more fully capture the various social forces that shape reality. One such additional area of theory that I have developed an interest in is ecocriticism. My work within this area of scholarship began with a conference paper I wrote for the BGSU Culture Club's symposium, *Cultures in Conversation: Environments, Landscapes, and Ecologies*. This piece analyzes Richard Powers' novel, *The Overstory*, through the lens of philosopher, Bruno Latour's, book, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. In this essay, I examine how fiction might serve as a tool for reimagining humanity's relationship with the earth—something that, I argue (along with many ecocriticism scholars), requires a rethinking of what it means to be human. I argue that Powers, following Latour, demonstrates the need for an immense decentering of humanity, if we are to successfully grapple with “the new climatic regime” that we now find ourselves in. My revisions of this essay focused mostly on contextualizing my argument within recent scholarship on Powers' novel—something that was necessary, given its very recent release date at the time during which I wrote my initial conference paper. I hope to continue expanding upon this paper, until it is of typical article length. My future additions and revisions will almost certainly involve a deeper dive into Latour's theories, as well as the works of other eco-critics.

My interest in theory has also expanded into social and political theory, more broadly. Part of the reason for this has been my growing interest in social movement studies, which was fostered by my close work with the American Culture Studies program here at BGSU. My growth as an interdisciplinary scholar in these areas is evident within my final portfolio essay, which critiques Bruce Holsinger's argument in his book, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*, that medievalist discourse arose suddenly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. I argue, instead, for the conservative movement's long-standing self-alignment with medievalism. This essay was originally written as a seminar paper for Professor Erin Labbie's English 6800 course on global medievalism. Due to its original conference-paper length, I focused my revisions mostly on adding additional examples of conservatism's use of medievalist imagery and rhetoric. I plan to continue expanding upon this essay, until it is of typical article length, at which point I will submit it for publication. One publication that I plan to submit this essay to is *Studies in Medievalism*. This journal's two most recent issues deal with very similar topics in the study of contemporary politics and medievalism, so my essay would be an ideal fit for it.

The act of revising these four essays over the past several months has been a very rewarding experience. Professor Gearhart's feedback and guidance, as my first reader, has helped me to grow as a scholar and writer. In particular, her emphasis on writing for my readers has been very important for my personal growth. Learning to break my longer essays into sections, and to clearly signpost key transitions with my work, has been very helpful, and is a skill that I know will continue to be of the utmost importance in my academic career.

As I prepare to graduate from BGSU, I can proudly look back on my time here as a success. When I came into this program, I had only my natural instincts as a writer and my

intellectual curiosity. Two years of hard work, paired with excellent mentorship from BGSU's wonderful English professors, has given me a strong grounding in the study of literature and theory, as well as a polished understanding of academic writing and the revision process. My goals, upon entering this program, were to learn these exact sorts of practical writing and revision skills, acquire new bodies of knowledge, and gain acceptance into a strong PhD program. I have been able to achieve each of these things. The following portfolio offers a snapshot of my growth as a student and a scholar during my time at BGSU.

“High Beams Only Make Things Worse”: Secular Faith in David Foster Wallace’s “Good  
Old Neon”

**Introduction**

In his book, *Modernism*, Peter Childs argues that various forces—both societal and ideological—helped to usher in the modernist movement at the turn of the Twentieth century. He cites Matthew Arnold as describing early modernist writing as a “modern style in terms of repose, confidence, tolerance, free activity of the mind, reason and universals” (Peters 19-20), while adding, himself, that “fifty years later the avant garde of literature expressed the opposite: alienation, plight, chaos, unreason, depression and a disenchantment with European culture” (Peters 19-20). Childs believes that the devastation of the first world war was largely responsible for this shift in sentiment, arguing that, while the modernist writers and thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century still believed in progress and in “a possibility of wholeness, whether of society or the individual. ... The modernists who followed after world war 1 were more noticeable for their pessimism and their sense of a failed, fragmented society, in which the uncomprehending individual was swallowed up by huge forces outside of personal control” (27). These sentiments were not exclusive to the literature of the time either, as Childs goes on to highlight the growth in the popularity of Herbert Spencer’s approach to what might best be called Social Darwinism, (i.e., the application of the theory of natural selection to human society), as well as other visions of the human psyche as being dictated by outside forces (e.g., the views put forth by many prominent Freudians and Marxists). Childs says, “all these thinkers, while offering liberating ideas of human change and progress, also proposed theories which overwhelmed individual agency or will within new systems of vast collective social and biological forces” (37). It is the lasting effects of this sense of fragmentation and

incomprehension, this lack of a sense of personal agency that was ushered in during the modernist era, that this essay seeks to illuminate. More specifically, I read David Foster Wallace's short story, "Good Old Neon," as a roadmap for combatting these effects and reclaiming a sense of one's agency. However, before moving into a deeper discussion of Wallace's story, I would like to explore, in a bit more detail, the effects of the various theories outlined by Childs.

A helpful concept for understanding these lasting effects is the ideology of positivism—or the idea that all truths must be scientifically verifiable. When applied to human experience, this concept complicates notions of free will and agency, as it, instead, sees human action as being biologically determined. In her Terry Lecture, *Absence of Mind*, Marilynne Robinson places major emphasis on the positivistic nature of the dominant theories of the modernist era, saying, "positivism was intended to banish the language of metaphysics as meaningless, and it supplied in its place a systematically reductionist conceptual vocabulary" (*Absence of Mind* xiii). She continues,

modernist or rationalist arguments are not harmonious with one another, except in their conclusion, which clearly exists in anticipation of its various justifications. This conclusion is, very briefly, that positivism is correct in excluding from the model of reality whatever science is (or was) not competent to verify or falsify. (Robinson, *Absence of Mind* xii)

Robinson believes that the positivist model of reality put forth by what she terms the major modernist theorists (e.g., Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche) is not only inaccurate, but also very dangerous.

A deeper understanding of this central argument within Robinson's work can be found by turning to her essay, "Darwinism." In this essay, Robinson ties the rise of positivism to the concurrent rise of "primitive, sometimes called classical, economics" (*The Death of Adam* 29), and argues that, "we find them separately and together encouraging faith in the value of self-interest and raw competition" (*The Death of Adam* 29). If one accepts this premise of Robinson's, then it is easy to see how contemporary neoliberal capitalism—through its vested interest in maintaining individualistic and competitive values—has played a major role in allowing positivistic notions to continue to dominate the human psyche. Robinson ends her essay with a lamentation for the loss of, and a call for the reclamation of, a fuller sense of the human self—as well as the sense of agency and purpose that accompanies such a worldview. She writes,

now that the mystery of the motive is solved—there are only self-seeking and aggression, and the illusions that conceal them from us—there is no place left for the soul, or even the self. Moral behavior has little real meaning, and inwardness, in the traditional sense, is not necessary or possible. ... So there is little use for the mind, the orderer and reconciler, the artist of the interior world. ... The old mystery of subjectivity is dispelled; individuality is a pointless complication of a very straightforward organic life. It is a thing that bears reflecting upon, how much was destroyed, when the modern world declared the death of Adam. (*The Death of Adam* 74)

Robinson paints a very bleak picture, and, while her method of argument and terminology may seem contrarian (e.g., the biblical Adam as a stand-in for human agency and inwardness isn't a mainstay in academic circles these days), I believe that her conclusions accurately capture some of the assumptions about the human self that still sit at the heart of contemporary discourse.

In this essay, I accept Robinson's central thesis that the modern world really has "declared the death of Adam" (or the death of human inwardness and agency), and that this declaration has had long-lasting and damaging effects on the ways in which humans conceive of their own motives. I argue that this declaration has greatly constrained humanity's belief in its own ability to change worldviews, usher in new ideals, and alter the course of society itself. I also accept the basic premise that art often reflects the ideology of the society it is created within. However, my interest is not in examining contemporary works that reflect the same positivistic assumptions that neoliberal society has continued to extol upon its citizens. Rather, my aim is to explore how fiction can go against the grain and confront this ideology, while seeking to offer potential paths out of the conundrum we find ourselves in. Therefore, as discussed, I examine David Foster Wallace's short story "Good Old Neon," as an example of how one might reclaim the notions of human agency and inwardness from the logic of positivism (a mission that I believe sits at the heart of all of Wallace's mature fiction). I believe that the approach Wallace takes can best be understood through the lens of literary theorist, Martin Hägglund's, concept of secular faith.

### **Secular Faith as an Antidote to Positivism**

It is important to note that scholars have, thus far, failed to come close to anything resembling a consensus when it comes to questions of how best to classify Wallace's worldview—especially, his aversion to dominant manifestations of secularism. This fact, I believe, stems from a failure to recognize the significance of the continued dominance of positivism as a worldview. In fact, because of the continued prevalence of this worldview, the secular, as a whole, has come to be equated with narrow notions of the materialistic, the biological, and the empirical. This leads any worldview that does not conform to these tenets

(like Wallace's) to be viewed as existing outside of the secular, and, therefore, to be painted as being religious. Martin Hägglund's concept of secular faith in his book, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, serves as a very valuable corrective to these narrow notions of the secular, and, in particular, as an excellent framework through which to understand Wallace's worldview.

Hägglund clearly outlines his distinction between religious and secular faith. In doing so, he is not focused on the common usage of the terms secular and religious—which are often used to indicate a binary between religiously-affiliated and church-going activities and belief codes, in contrast to those that are scientific or popular-culture-based. In fact, Hägglund's use of the term faith within both concepts helps to clarify the ways in which he sees each of these approaches at crafting meaning as sharing a common undergirding. By choosing to focus on the notion of faith (i.e., a chosen belief lacking in concrete proof), Hägglund presupposes a role for human agency to play within each approach, and highlights the centrality that chosen, personal beliefs and actions play in shaping one's worldview, as well as culture at large.

When it comes to his definition of religious faith, Hägglund writes, “what I call religious forms of faith is a devaluation of our finite lives as a lower form of being. All world religions ... hold that the highest form of existence or the most desirable form of life is eternal rather than finite. To be religious—or to adopt a religious perspective on life—is to regard our finitude as a lack, an illusion, or a fallen state of being” (Hägglund 6). By defining religious faith as an orientation toward the eternal, at the expense of the temporal, Hägglund simultaneously alters typical formulations of the secular, as evidenced by his definition of secular faith. Hägglund elaborates,

the sense of finitude—the sense of the ultimate fragility of everything we care about—is at the heart of what I call *secular faith*. To have *secular faith* is to be devoted to a life that will end, to be dedicated to projects that can fail or break down. ... I call it *secular faith* because it is devoted to a form of life that is bounded by time. ... To have *secular faith* is to be dedicated to persons or projects that are worldly and temporal. (Hägglund 6)

This focus on the temporal must be clearly distinguished from that of the scientific or the natural—concepts that might seem right at home within positivism, as well as the modernist movement it helped shape. Rather than accepting that humanity's aims and motives are limited by biologically determined desires and external stimuli (as positivism does), or that the universe has some eternally bounded destination beyond humanity's understanding (as religious faith does), Hägglund's argument for the approach of secular faith is, instead, rooted in the belief that we can shape our own destinies, and that the way we do so is by dedicating ourselves to our ideals, despite their fragile nature. Hägglund continues,

to have *secular faith* is to acknowledge that the object of our faith is dependent on the practice of faith. I call it *secular faith*, since the object of devotion does not exist independently of those who believe in its importance and who keep it alive through their fidelity. The object of *secular faith*—e.g., the life we are trying to lead, the institutions we are trying to build, the community we are trying to achieve—is inseparable from what we do and how we do it. (Hägglund 7)

This focus on the temporal as the ultimate source of sanctity and value, and as something that can only be sustained through the ideals, bonds, and institutions we form with one another, here on earth, is well-aligned with the thought of Friedrich Hegel—something that Hägglund recognizes and expands upon.

Hägglund offers more specifics, regarding the ways in which Hegel's dialectic might be seen as a form of secular faith. He writes of Hegel's views on the development of shared communal norms, and the ways they shape, and are shaped by, human consciousness:

while our norms are not given by God or Nature, their authority is not merely subjective, since our own attitudes and interests are formed by socially shared practices from the beginning. For us to have any sense of what counts as good and just in the first place, these norms must be enacted in how we are treated as persons (how we are recognized by others) and how we hold one another accountable for what we do. (Hägglund 355)

Thus, it is evident that, for Hegel, the development of norms, and the cultivation of new and more inclusive modes of consciousness that inform these norms, is an ongoing process—one that is fully grounded in the temporally-bounded commitments humans share with one another. As Hägglund goes on to highlight, “in Hegel's terms, we are not simply conscious of what we do but self-conscious of being answerable for what we do and thereby capable of questioning the principles of our practices” (356). In my view, this awareness of our own role in crafting our actions and beliefs, and the sense of responsibility that comes with this awareness, can serve as a powerful way to combat the ideology of positivism, as it presupposes our own ability to shape the world around us, and the sense of personal agency inherent to such a view. Thus, in society's current state, where positivistic and deterministic notions of the human self dominate our discourse, and neoliberal capitalism continues its reign of global hegemony, further reinforcing these notions, the question of how to encourage a Hegelian worldview (or one built upon secular faith) is a very important one. This question, I believe, is what animates Wallace's mature fiction, rendering them works of secular faith.

In contrast to Hägglund's human-agency-focused paradigm of secular and religious faith, the concept of the postsecular (which has, at times, been applied to Wallace's work) perfectly exhibits the naturalization of the precepts of positivism, and its effect in propagating a narrowly defined notion of the secular. In his book, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*, John A. McClure helps to define the postsecular, saying,

this body of fiction can be called 'postsecular,' for several reasons: because the stories it tells trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious; because its ontological signature is a religiously inflected disruption of secular constructions of the real; and because its ideological signature is the rearticulation of a dramatically 'weakened' religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects. (McClure 3)

From this definition, one can sense that McClure equates the religious with spirituality, more broadly. For instance, why should a worldview be classified as "weakened religiosity," when it also shares "secular, progressive values and projects"? What is it, for McClure, that separates the religious from the secular? He goes on to offer a fuller description of the postsecular, while still failing to clarify this distinction, saying,

certain features are constant across the field of postsecular texts. The constant conversions of postsecular fiction do not deliver those who experience them from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief. Instead, they tend to strand those who experience them in ideologically mixed and confusing middle zones of the conventional conversion narrative. ... And yet the postsecular characters deposited in these zones do not seem particularly uncomfortable there nor particularly impatient to move on to some more fully elaborated form of belief and practice. (4)

This passage illustrates that the postsecular phenomenon in literature McClure describes is well-aligned with Hägglund's notion of faith (both religious and secular)—something evident in the lack of literalism in the characters' worldviews, their comfort with ambiguity, and their emphasis on personal choice and agency. Thus, rather than a religious conversion away from secularism, McClure seems, instead, to be describing a lack of rigid ideology, an absence of binary thinking. The fact that he believes these traits to constitute a turn away from the secular demonstrates, once again, just how naturalized the precepts of positivism have become. Under these dominant assumptions, any non-materialist belief in human agency is understood to lie outside of the secular, and is, thus, equated (however loosely) with the religious. Hägglund, by defining the core differences between the religious and the secular, while centering the importance, within each form of faith, of human agency and where one's ideals are directed, offers us a more expansive understanding of each. The question we must ask, then, when discussing Wallace's work, is where do his characters turn to as the space of ultimate meaning and sanctity—the eternal, or the temporal?

### **Defining Wallace's Faith**

Keeping in mind this central question Hägglund proposes, in regard to defining the secular versus the religious, one can better interrogate current analyses of Wallace's work—especially, those that grapple with his spirituality. One such example is Martin Brick's article, "A postmodernist's progress: Thoughts on spirituality across the David Foster Wallace canon." In this piece, Brick cites Wallace as saying: "I enjoy church and I enjoy being a part of a larger thing" (66). However, he argues that "despite statements like this, little attention has been paid to the issue of Wallace's spirituality" (66). This hesitancy to engage with Wallace's direct experience with organized religion can, I believe, be attributed to the same rigid dichotomy

already discussed, of a secular that is seen as one and the same with positivism and materialism, on the one hand, and a reductive and literalist form of religion on the other. In other words, Wallace's worldview and writing do not come off as being aligned with what is traditionally seen as religious, so, for many years, his church attendance was conveniently ignored. Brick illustrates the shape that this confusion around how to grapple with Wallace's faith has taken, arguing that "some attention has been given to 'belief' in his [Wallace's] writing, obliquely examining faith in his characters, but more prominently as part of an ongoing discussion of 'sincerity' or of the ethical agenda to his writing, which represents a prominent arm of Wallace studies" (66). While this statement was very accurate in 2014, when Brick published his article, some scholars, in recent years, have been more willing to directly analyze Wallace's spirituality. However, this newfound willingness to engage with Wallace's work's moralism and spirituality has not led to any more clarity, when it comes to accurately describing his motivations. I believe that this is due to the same reductive paradigm discussed above—one that fails to offer a satisfying distinction between the secular and the religious.

One such recent example of scholarship that directly grapples with the role of religion and spirituality in Wallace's work is Christopher Kocela's book chapter, "The Zen of 'Good Old Neon': David Wallace, Alan Watts, and the Double-Bind of Selfhood," from the collection, *David Foster Wallace: Presences of the Other*. In this piece, Kocela argues that Buddhist beliefs, such as an emphasis on emptiness and a "proclamation of no-self" (58), are highly evident in Wallace's mature fiction (including, "Good Old Neon"). He says, "These concepts of no-self, emptiness, and interdependence clearly accord with Wallace's view, consistently articulated throughout his interviews and fiction, that ethical and social responsibility are predicated on relinquishing one's self-centered orientation toward the world" (58). While I agree with Kocela's

argument concerning Wallace's critique of self-centeredness, his attempt to equate this stance with an endorsement of the Buddhist concepts of no-self and emptiness feels quite off to me. Part of the reason for this is the way in which Kocela seems to equate an engagement with this world (i.e., the temporal) with a narrow form of self-interest. This belief smacks of the same assumptions discussed above, pertaining to the equation of the secular, or the temporal, with a positivistic worldview. However, by reassessing the temporal in terms of Hägglund's notion of secular faith, it is evident that a true engagement with the world is the exact opposite of this narrow form of self-interest. Moreover, the act of disengaging from oneself, and the celebration of emptiness, bring about other ethical conundrums that, in Hägglund view (and, I believe, Wallace's) serve to complicate attempts at leading a meaningful, ethical life. Part of the reason for this is the way in which these views encourage an attitude that prizes the act of relinquishing care for one's temporal life, of prizing personal enlightenment and peace over the act of meaningful engagement with others.

While Kocela's argument (through its invocation of Alan Watts' nontraditional form of Buddhism) follows the more common approach of painting Wallace as a vaguely spiritual writer of sorts, there have also been attempts to align Wallace's worldview with more traditional religious traditions as well. One such example is "Your Temple is Self and Sentiment: David Foster Wallace's Diagnostic Novels," by Michael J. O'Connell. In this essay, O'Connell attempts to align the worldview shared in Wallace's fiction with a specific religious tradition—in this case, Christianity. O'Connell writes,

I contend that it makes sense to think of him [Wallace] as a Christian writer, and not just a post-postmodernist or philosophical one, because, while he is not in any way didactic or dogmatic, his work is preoccupied with issues of faith and doubt in the modern,

secular world, and he often (though not exclusively) positions these questions within a Christian framework. (267)

In this passage, one can already see that O'Connell is well aware of the fact that many people will feel some tension with the decision to classify Wallace's work as religious, and he, himself, makes it very clear that Wallace's supposed Christianity should be understood as more philosophical than dogmatic. O'Connell goes on to argue that, in contrast to what Amy Hungerford defines as postsecularism's "belief without content, belief in meaninglessness, belief for its own sake" (137), Wallace, instead, "eschews contentless spiritualism in favor of a more concrete, religious sensibility that critiques modernity and is grounded in action, ritual, and practice" (269). O'Connell characterizes this religious sensibility by describing Wallace's magnum opus, saying,

*Infinite Jest*, for instance, for all of its verbal virtuosity, does not present itself as religious experience; rather, it depicts a path of submission as the proper relation between the addict and the Higher Power of AA, and not only that, but just as in the Catholic fiction of O'Connor and Percy, this process necessitates a community of faith if it is to be successful. This pattern of surrendering one's sense of self-interest in favor of something larger than oneself, which can be aligned with the transcendent, recurs throughout *The Pale King* as well. (269)

O'Connor's description of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* is, for the most part, quite accurate, but his leap toward aligning the "community of faith" in each novel with the religious, once again, seems to betray the equation of any non-positivistic thinking with religious faith. Thus, while O'Connor is correct in describing Wallace's worldview as being informed by faith, his

failure to recognize what Hagglund defines as secular faith as another potential alternative to positivistic thinking leads him to automatically assume that Wallace's faith is religious.

### **“Good Old Neon” and Secular Faith**

Keeping in mind Wallace's emphasis on community and on removing oneself from a narrow form of self-interest, I would now like to turn to a close reading of “Good Old Neon,” in order to better demonstrate how this story can be seen to demonstrate Wallace's alignment with Hagglund's notion of secular faith. My central argument pertaining to this story is that the metafictional Wallace's imagined version of Neal is suffering from a sense of fraud, due to the trappings of the logic of positivism, and the reductive assumptions about the human self that this logic proposes. I believe that Wallace sees these assumptions as sitting at the heart of contemporary life, and that he attempts to push back against them through the act of writing this story—a story which, through its metafictional components, is able to convincingly offer Wallace's readers a picture for how they might combat these assumptions in their own lives. Ultimately, as discussed, I believe that the path out of positivistic logic that Wallace demonstrates to his readers can best be classified as secular faith.

At the beginning of “Good Old Neon” we, as readers, find ourselves stuck in the hyper-self-aware, first-person narration of a self-described fraud named Neal. Neal says of himself at this time: “At only twenty-nine I'd made creative associate, and verily as they say I was a fair haired boy and on the fast track but wasn't happy at all, whatever *happy* means, but of course I didn't say this to anybody because it was such a cliché” (Wallace, “Good Old Neon” 142). He has spent his entire life in this way, “Putting in all this time and energy to create a certain impression and get approval or acceptance that then I felt nothing about because it didn't have anything to do with who I really was inside (Wallace 142). Thus, he finds himself trying various

methods to cure himself of his unhappiness and his sense of fraudulence: “EST, riding a ten-speed to Nova Scotia and back, hypnosis, cocaine” (Wallace 143). None of these methods, including a last-ditch effort at psychotherapy, have worked for Neal, leading to his present state.

The storyline suddenly shifts to Neal’s description of what death feels like, and then his qualifying of these claims, and the potential doubts we might have about his actually being dead: “It doesn’t really matter what you think about me, because despite appearances this isn’t even really about me. All I’m trying to do is sketch out one little part of what it was like before I died” (Wallace 152). We are told, by an apparently dead man, about what it feels like to die, while he tries to answer for us why we are with him “sitting here in this car using words and taking up your increasingly precious time” (Wallace 152). It isn’t until the end of the story that a little more clarification is provided around what this conversation is, and how Neal is speaking to us, the reader, in this way, when David Foster Wallace makes an appearance himself, in the final two pages of the story: “David Wallace blinks in the midst of idly scanning class photos from his 1980 Aurora West H.S. yearbook” (Wallace 180). The metafictional Wallace finds himself looking at Neal’s photo, upon the news of his death, and realizing that

the cliché that you can’t ever truly know what’s going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inebriated spiral that keeps you from getting anywhere. (Wallace 181)

The shift to second person narration in the story clarifies the fact that Neal sees the reader as a passenger on his journey, as someone impacted by the same sense of fraudulence he feels, and as someone he must warn—especially, with his newfound wisdom after death. This reader-as-passenger dynamic also encompasses the metafictional David Foster Wallace, at the story’s end,

who is visibly struggling against some of the same proclivities as the narrator (something that aligns with the view of Neal's narration being a representation of the metafictional Wallace's process of imagining Neal's death), such as self-centered projection of one's feelings onto others, and an innate fear of sentimentality and cliché.

The proximity with which we find ourselves in relation to both the narrator and the metafictional author, all of us seemingly sitting in the same imagined car together, rushing into a bridge and our imminent death, helps to demonstrate the fact that Wallace sees his readers and himself as impacted by the same assumptions as Neal—assumptions that, as discussed, are rooted in the dominance of positivism as an ideology, and the reductive view of the human self that this ideology upholds.

An important indicator of the ways in which positivism dominates Neal's sense of self can be seen within the sense of doubt he has, regarding the personal testimony of his own mind. This doubt is central to the constant feeling he has of being a fraud. After realizing he had been deceiving himself into thinking he was making efforts at sincerity in a meditation course, Neal moves on to a charismatic church, only to once again experience “a flash of self-awareness or clarity or whatever in which I [he] suddenly stopped conning myself and realized that I'd been a fraud all these months in the church, too, and was really only saying and doing these things because all the real parishioners were doing them and I wanted everyone to think I was sincere” (Wallace 158). The assumptions Neal holds about himself as a self-interested and delusional fraud never really change, but are instead forced temporarily out of focus, as he continuously attempts to change himself, to become a different version of himself, without addressing the baseline beliefs he holds about himself as a human being. A firm belief in his own delusion, and an inability to trust his thoughts and actions as really being his own, dooms any attempts Neal

makes to craft a sense of meaning and purpose in his life, eventually leading to his committing suicide.

To better understand how the ideology of positivism impacted literature throughout the twentieth century, and, thus, the specific literary tendencies Wallace attempted to push back against, and move beyond, through the writing “Good Old Neon,” I would like to consider the ways in which postmodernist literature might be read as a response to the same positivistic assumptions that, as discussed by Childs above, so greatly impacted modernist literature. In his book, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale offers an ideal way of understanding the process of this response, stressing the primacy of the view that “*postmodernism* follows from *modernism*, in some sense, more than it follows after modernism” (McHale 5). His argument focuses on the inner logic of modernism as the catalyst for this shift, rather than the changes to capitalism stressed by so many other major postmodernist critics (e.g., Fredric Jameson and David Harvey). McHale writes,

There is a kind of inner logic or inner dynamics ... governing the change of dominant form from modernist to postmodernist fiction, intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality of instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they “tip over” into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions—the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible. (McHale 11)

McHale’s analysis places epistemological uncertainty at the heart of modernist thought (an uncertainty Robinson argues is caused by a mistrust of personal testimony and agency, due to the reductive sense of self at the core of dominant positivistic theories). McHale’s view also aligns

with a Hegelian vision of consciousness, as, in McHale's vision of postmodernism, the imperfection of a model of reality built upon "epistemological uncertainty" (modernism) eventually leads to its antithesis, a model built upon "ontological plurality of instability" (postmodernism). McHale's model of the workings of modernism and postmodernism can also be seen as anticipating the resurgence of an epistemological focus within fiction, due to the limits of the ontological questioning prevalent in postmodernist fiction—a trend that has come to fruition through what many critics now deem post-postmodernism.

Wallace's form of post-postmodernist fiction is widely considered to be that of the new sincerity strain—a viewpoint that Adam Kelly's essay, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," is credited with popularizing. In this piece, Kelly explores Lionel Trilling's argument that "closely associates the cultural trumping of sincerity by authenticity with the intense but non-confessional exploration of the self characteristic of literary modernism" (Kelly 132). Kelly says Trilling argues that authenticity "conceives truth to the self as an end and not simply as a means" (132), while, with sincerity "truth to the self is conceived of as a means of ensuring truth to the other" (132). By tracing sincerity's disappearance from cultural relevance back to the advent of literary modernism, Kelly's approach aligns with my own argument that the positivistic assumptions of modernist logic still sit at the heart of the contemporary condition. At the same time, his argument helps to clarify Wallace's attempts at rejuvenating sincerity as, ultimately, being an attempt to escape from the constraints of positivism—the root source of both the modernist and postmodernist vision of the self. Kelly's description of authenticity, and its dominance within literary modernism, as well as within culture more broadly, up to the present day, highlights the ways in which doubts surrounding one's personal agency and testimony can lead to self-absorption. Alternatively, sincerity places primacy on "ensuring truth to the other,"

something that allows for the crafting of new societal ideals and bonds, which, as Hägglund argues, are the foundation upon which our sense of self is built. Thus, a return toward the value of sincerity aligns with a strategy for rejuvenating the Hegelian view of the self—a necessary step in the promotion of a worldview built upon secular faith.

However, later in this same essay Kelly turns his focus to the modern (i.e., contemporary) self's perception of others, rather than prioritizing the occupation it has with its vision of itself. Kelly does so by arguing that new sincerity is a “complex, contemporary logic” (136) for dealing with “what happens when the anticipation of others' perception of one's outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating causal status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic” (136). Kelly seems to confuse cause and effect, in this analysis, as Robinson would argue that it is, instead, the loss of a sense of personal inwardness and agency (something resulting from the view, deeply entrenched by the ideology of positivism, that our thoughts and actions are not our own) that leads one to believe their own inner states have no validity, but are merely reacting to external stimuli. Self-consciousness and anxiety can thus be seen as the lasting effects, resulting from this vision of the self—effects that lead one to focus primarily on the perception others hold of them, at the expense of defining their own values and ideals, and attempting to act upon them.

This dynamic helps to shed more light on Wallace's purposes in “Good Old Neon.” It is Neal's lack of a sense of an authentic, inward self, that leads to his sense of fraud and his following self-consciousness. Ultimately, new sincerity is Wallace's attempt to use fiction as a tool for combating these effects of positivistic assumptions, which reduce one's sense of the human self and cause one to mistrust personal testimony and agency. Wallace's work can thus be seen as being a part of yet another shift in focus of a battle being fought since the advent of

literary modernism. Until these reductive assumptions are dispelled, an accurate account of the self, that fully acknowledges the central role human agency and consciousness play in crafting reality, will never be possible. Through this close reading of Wallace's fiction, it is evident that a valuable first step in reclaiming this fuller sense of the human self is to exchange a self-involved preoccupation with authenticity for the outward facing ideal of sincerity.

Now, I would like to return to our position, as readers, in the car with Neal, as he looks to commit suicide in the final pages of "Good Old Neon." Neal says,

The ground fog tends to get more intense by the second until it seems that the whole world is just what's in your headlights' reach. High beams don't work in fog, they only make things worse. You can go ahead and try them but you'll see what happens, all they do is light up the fog so it seems even denser. That's kind of a minor paradox, that sometimes you can actually see farther with low beams than high. (Wallace 177)

This description acknowledges the temptation of holding on to hyper-rationality and a sense of control, the positivistic reflex instilled in all of us to greet every form of darkness, or uncertainty, with the "high beams" of our own constraining logic. This acknowledgement is paired with a warning that any attempts to rationalize existence with positivism's basic assumptions will, in the end, lead to more fog—limiting one's ability to experience a fuller sense of existence. As we continue to let go of our preconceptions, heeding Neal's advice, and moving with him (along the train of thought of the metafictional Wallace—the actual source of Neal's narration) toward the crash into the embankment, he prepares us for what awaits us after death, saying:

The truth is, you already know what it's like. You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of

what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes. (Wallace 178)

Wallace helps us to imagine the death, or the end of, the highly constrained and hollowed out notion we have of ourselves, bringing us closer to a sense of inwardness—a fuller sense of ourselves that is always there, under the surface. He demonstrates this process through the efforts of the metafictional Wallace, whose recognition of these truths, and of the irrevocable loss that is the end of one's temporal life, is represented by Neal's narration.

In the story's final pages, the metafictional Wallace finds himself “trying to reconcile what this luminous guy had seemed like from the outside with whatever on the interior must have driven him to kill himself in such a dramatic and doubtlessly painful way” (Wallace 181). This process of reconciliation leaves him urging “the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him to command that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, ‘not another word’” (181). It is an awareness of, and resistance to, the ideology of positivism and its contemporary manifestation, in the form of self-consciousness and cynicism, that the metafictional Wallace achieves and, in doing so, he is able to envision a fuller existence for Neal and for all of us—making us aware of the “enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe” that dwells within each of us. At the same time, Wallace demonstrates the miraculous nature of human consciousness and its ability to recognize its own time-bounded nature, stressing, through the use of the metafictional Wallace as a device, that this “room,” and the empathy we, as readers, and he, as an author, feel for Neal, is both incomparably fragile, and valuable. It exists in Wallace's mind, as well as our own, and its loss is something

irrevocable and saddening, something we must fight against through the self-control of our own way of thinking.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, Wallace's call, in "Good Old Neon," for a hyper-awareness of our surroundings, of our ability to craft our own meaning, and of the sanctity of our temporal lives helps to offer his readers an example of the ways in which they might combat positivistic notions of the human self in their own lives, and regain a belief in personal testimony and agency. In his book, *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace*, Jon Baskin writes of Wallace's process in doing so, "In calling Wallace's mature fiction therapeutic, I mean to imply that it is best looked at as a 'series of examples,' intended to therapeutically expose and treat not only a set of problems but also a point of view, or what Wittgenstein would have called a 'picture'" (6). In the case of "Good Old Neon," and, I believe, all of Wallace's mature fiction, the point of view that Wallace looks to expose and treat is the one offered by the ideology of positivism. Baskin goes on to describe the psychological problems many of Wallace's characters (like Neal) face, saying,

whatever their problems, they cannot *merely* be attributed to exposure to pervasive popular media or to the addictive distractions of consumer capitalism. ... One of the truly philosophical things about Wallace as a thinker ... is that he considers culture *as a whole* to be oriented by certain ideals or pictures. Whatever habits of mind have come to feel natural to his characters will also have influenced the institutions that shaped those characters. (Baskin 10)

This argument perfectly summarizes how Neal's hollowed out sense of self can be seen to derive from the positivistic picture he takes of the world—something that the metafictional Wallace is

able to avoid by choosing to think differently, and choosing a point of view that places the utmost value on our temporal lives, acknowledges our inwardness, and believes in our agency. At the same time, Baskin's argument lends support to the view of Wallace's project as, ultimately, a Hegelian one that is interested in demonstrating the ways in which human consciousness shapes, and is shaped by, societal institutions and ideals.

The culminating effect of the picture that Wallace crafts in "Good Old Neon," of how one might act sincerely in the face of the cynicism and self-consciousness inherent to a positivistic worldview, serves to perfectly demonstrate Hägglund's notion of secular faith. The sense of inwardness that Wallace asks us to grasp, through Neal's descriptions of life after death, is one that is shown to be intrinsic to our time-bounded selves. This is demonstrated through the fact that Neal's narration is embodied in the mind of the metafictional Wallace, as he fights off his own cynical and self-conscious urges. Neal's death can therefore be seen as the metaphorical death of the ideology of positivism—something that allows for a reclamation of a sense of our own inwardness and agency. This reclamation of inwardness is found through the metafictional Wallace's act of mourning Neal's death, and his realization of the irrevocability of the loss represented by it. Through the unique formal approach Wallace takes with this story, he is able to show the possibility of this reclamation as existing in all of us, as Neal, the metafictional Wallace, and Wallace's readers all find themselves together in "this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe." Thus, Wallace is able to offer his readers a picture for how to reclaim this sense of agency and inwardness in their own lives. In doing so, he allows us to take a powerful first step toward reimagining ourselves and reassessing our surroundings and norms.

This process, as I have argued, is a necessary first step, in order for us to follow Hegel's path for the progression of human consciousness, and the development of new institutions and ideals. As Wallace demonstrates, all we need, in order to remove the "tiny keyholes" of positivistic assumptions that currently keep us from a fuller and more accurate sense of ourselves, is a little secular faith.

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“Trudging Through the Ruins and the Relics”: *Spring Breakers*, *Midnight Cowboy* and the  
Expansive Spirit of the Western Under Capitalist Realism

## Introduction

In his recent book, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*, Greg Grandin argues that “all nations have borders, and many today even have walls. But only the United States has had a frontier, or at least a frontier that has served as a proxy for liberation, synonymous with the possibilities and promises of modern life itself and held out as a model for the rest of the world to emulate” (2-3). This deeply ingrained glorification of the frontier within American culture has continued to persist throughout the nation’s history. As Grandin goes on to argue,

when the physical frontier was closed, its imagery could easily be applied to other arenas of expansion, to markets, war, culture, technology, science, the psyche, politics. In the years after World War II, the ‘frontier’ became a central metaphor to capture a vision of a new kind of world order. Past empires established their dominance in an environment where resources were thought to be finite. ... Now, though, the United States made a credible claim to be a different sort of global power, presiding over a world economy premised on endless growth. (3-4)

This frontier ideology, especially as it has manifested itself in the United States since the postwar era, has served as fertile ground for the development and popularization of the Western film genre, as audience’s have aligned their own (and their nation’s) pursuit of wealth and globalized economic opportunities with the image of the Western frontier.

Despite the popular image of the noble Western gunman cloaked in classic cowboy attire that grew in prominence during the postwar era, the ideology of the frontier was, and is, quite

malleable. Thus, it has found its way into film in a variety of ways. This fact is made evident in Christopher Frayling's book, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*. In a section on Sergio Leone's films, Frayling highlights the immense changes to the ideology of the Western that were ushered in by the Spaghetti Western movement that Leone helped to lead. He argues that, rather than offering viewers a traditional-Western-like vision of good versus evil, Leone, instead,

watches the brutality of his protagonists with a detached calm: they are brutal because of the environment in which they exist. And they make no attempt to change that environment. They accept it, without question. ...

The primary motivation is money, the dollar. Not so much money as usable for ready cash, but, as one critic put it, 'money as a prize, as something which must be possessed'. (160)

Thus, even within films, such as Leone's, that share many of the traditional formalistic aspects of the Western genre, the version of frontier ideology that they put forward can already be seen to have changed from that of traditional Westerns in many ways. This, I believe, can be attributed to both different cultural norms (like Leone's Italian heritage), as well as the shifting nature of capitalism over time—something that, as Grandin highlights, is at the core of frontier ideology.

One must also remember that the Western, despite common perceptions, need not be set in America (as even most of Leone's 1960s Spaghetti Westerns were). In his book, *Eastern Westerns: Film and genre outside and inside Hollywood*, Stephen Teo describes the rise of the Western genre in Asia, while also decrying what he sees as the mislabeling of many Easterns (or martial arts films) as Westerns, simply due to the similarities between the common settings of these two genres. Teo writes, "just because these films emphasise 'dusty western settings' do not

make them Westerns. ... This kind of ‘complete mix-up’ critical approach is, I now believe, mistaken, smacking of a lazy structuralism that fails to denote the qualitative aspects of either genre” (Teo 5). Teo goes on to argue that, in contrast to Easterns, which he sees as greatly differing from Westerns, there are, in fact, some films that should be considered Eastern Westerns (meaning Westerns made in in Eastern countries, or sharing elements inspired by these nation’s cultures). Teo says that these sorts of films are

manifestly western in spirit and theme ... but ... also contain the same outward elements that are universal to the Western: characters dressed in cowboy costumes and big hats, gunfights (as distinct from swordfights) ... not to mention the landscape space. It is therefore important to emphasize that Eastern Westerns are fundamentally Westerns in form as well as spirit. (5)

Teo continues, “there are certainly samurai movies, or other ‘Easterns’ such as wuxia and kung fu movies, that are not Westerns in form but could be so in spirit” (5). This distinction between the Western form and spirit is important, as, for the purposes of this paper, it is the spirit of the Western, in the continued prevalence of frontier ideology within contemporary America, that I believe sits at the heart of the 2013 American film, *Spring Breakers*, and which, to my mind, qualifies it as a Western.

While there continues to be a proliferation of films that follow the more traditional formalistic aspects attributed to the Western, *Spring Breakers*, at first glance, is a film that most people would likely not see as being a Western at all. It is the commonness of this act of devaluing the spirit of the Western, in favor of emphasizing its formalistic elements, that, I believe, makes *Spring Breakers* an important film to view through this lens. It is my belief that, as Grandin argues, frontier logic (which I equate with the spirit of the Western) has been a

constant force within American society, and, therefore, within American film. Thus, by focusing on the spirit of the Western, and locating this spirit in a contemporary coming-of-age film like *Spring Breakers*, I hope to demonstrate just how dominant, and intensified, this frontier logic has become. At the same time, I hope to expand upon Teo's analysis of the Western by highlighting how wide-ranging and malleable the genre can be seen to be when one chooses to emphasize its spirit, rather than getting lost in its formalistic elements.

Central to my analysis is the act of demonstrating the ways in which the frontier logic outlined by Grandin has changed over time, and how it functions in contemporary America—something that I equate with the workings of what Mark Fisher terms capitalist realism in his seminal book, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Fisher aligns his definition of this term with the popular quote, often attributed to both Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson, that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2), saying, “that slogan captures precisely what I mean by ‘capitalist realism’: the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it” (2). Fisher goes on to directly tie the ramifications of this dominant ideology to youth culture, arguing that “for most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable. ... The fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment” (Fisher 7-8). I believe that *Spring Breakers*, as a coming-of-age film, features young characters that operate by this assumption—an assumption that dominates the film's particular rendition of frontier logic, grounding it within in an endless pursuit of

individualistic pleasure and capital accumulation (one that is separated from any notion of change or opportunity outside of the bounds of late capitalism).

While capitalist realism, and the further intensification, over time, of the frontier logic of capital, has caused many films, from various genres, to function as Westerns, I believe that *Spring Breakers*, as a film of the coming-of-age genre, offers a particularly helpful lens through which to analyze this expansion and intensification of frontier logic into all aspects of life. Part of the reason for this fit is what Danielle B. Schwartz, in her essay, “‘You Look Good Wearing My Future’: Resisting Neoliberalism in John Hughes's *Pretty in Pink* and *Some Kind of Wonderful*,” describes as the fact that in coming-of-age films “the teen ... becomes a loose category somewhere between induction into subjecthood and fully formed subject” (Schwartz 395). This liminal space occupied by the adolescent psyche, therefore, allows for more flexibility, when it comes to critiquing the dominant ideologies governing the societies that these films’ characters find themselves within, as, in some cases, certain characters have yet to become fully enveloped within said ideologies. In *Spring Breakers*, this fact is perfectly represented by the character, Faith (played by Selena Gomez), who expresses hesitancy when confronted with the frontier logic of capitalist realism—a hesitancy that eventually leads to her outright rejection of this logic, in the form of a decision to leave Spring Break, and her friends, behind.

Because, as discussed, it is the spirit of the Western, in the form of frontier logic, that I am especially concerned with, rather than the formalistic qualities that are often associated with the genre, the liminal subjective space Faith occupies makes *Spring Breakers* an ideal fit for my aims. This is due to the fact that the spirit of the Western is ultimately founded upon a subjective state, rather than a physical destination. This fact is represented in the film, as the very notion of spring break (which, I believe, should be seen as a stand-in for the frontier) is shown to be a

mindset, rather than an event or physical destination. Thus, Faith, by rejecting this mindset, allows one to see its subjective nature more clearly.

### **The Ever-Changing Contours of the Western**

Teo is not alone in his analysis of the highly malleable nature of the Western genre, nor in his expression of the ongoing tension surrounding how to define certain films that seem to share some overlap with dominant notions of the genre. In his book, *Postwesterns: Cinema, Region, West*, Neil Campbell argues for the continuing relevance of the Western genre, despite the many calls for its demise—calls that have been ongoing for decades. He does so, in part, by pushing back against Gilles Deleuze’s argument that the genre of the Western collapsed “through revisionism and new forms during the postwar period” (Campbell 2), arguing, instead, that “the Western genre, rather than collapse, actually found a project of positive creation through which to interrogate the very ideological frameworks that had conjured it into being in the first place” (2). Campbell’s term for this “project of positive creation” is the postwestern—a term that he adopts from other scholars in the field.

Campbell elaborates on this terminology with references to various claims from other critics, such as Philip French’s definition of “the post-Western as always examining the ‘limits and inaccuracies of Western generic formulas’, with particular emphasis on ‘the ironic parody of the Western myth’” (Campbell 7). In addition, he cites French’s view that this label should include “those films that were ‘made in other countries [and] redefined and expanded the meaning of the west itself as mythic terrain or territory’” (Campbell 7). These are helpful distinctions for further demonstrating how *Spring Breakers* might be seen as a Western (or, from Campbell’s viewpoint, as a post-Western), as the specific rendition of frontier logic under capitalist realism that the film expresses is, as discussed, almost completely detached from

geography. In *Spring Breakers*, the frontier is, instead, firmly rooted in an imagined vision of endless capital accumulation and commodity signs (i.e., “the mythic terrain or territory” of the Western, as expressed under capitalist realism).

Despite the alignment between much of Campbell’s description of the post-Western and more recent evolutions of the genre, the very concept of the post-Western is still a fraught one. In his book, *Late Westerns: The Persistence of a Genre*, Lee Clark Mitchell writes,

The Western best clarifies how fully genres change yet endure— indeed, how they must change to endure— and solicit our interest by confirming expectations while nonetheless diverging from them, inventively, entertainingly. That process, once understood, helps explain our routinely renewed interest in a supposedly identifiable genre regularly viewed as on its way out. (Mitchell 3)

This notion of the ever-changing and flexible nature of the Western (as well as other genres) complicates claims of the need for post-Western as a category. Mitchell continues,

My argument extends from the premise that genres are always hybridized, consisting of a shifting array of thematic and formal constructions, never so distinct or finished as critics retrospectively make them out to be. In fact, my more aggressive claim is that recent ‘postwestern’ critics are actually diminishing the power of the Western genre— and by extension, of all genres— not so much in limiting what recent versions have achieved but more in curtailing an appreciation of what earlier films themselves had already accomplished. (Mitchell 7)

As Mitchell argues, the Western has been a highly flexible and variant genre for decades and attempts to label more recent versions of the Western as post-Westerns can be seen, in some ways, to ignore this fact. Therefore, Campbell prefers the term “late Western”—or even, simply,

Western. Thus, in agreement with Campbell, I believe that *Spring Breakers* should simply be called what it is—a Western.

### ***Midnight Cowboy* and the Slow Disappearance of the Western's Form**

In order to further emphasize the flexibility of the Western genre, as well as Teo's points regarding the distinction between a film that functions as a Western on a formal level, versus on a spiritual level, I will now analyze *Midnight Cowboy*, directed by John Schlesinger, and released in 1969. This film helps to highlight how any small semblance to the Western on a formalistic level, no matter how insignificant to a film's larger purpose, often serves to make critics far more comfortable with classifying it as Western. I believe that *Midnight Cowboy* is an ideal film through which to examine this fact, as its formalistic semblances to the Western are very surface level, while, conversely, its occupation of the spirit of the Western, in the form of frontier ideology, is quite profound. Therefore, many critics are correct in seeing *Midnight Cowboy* as a Western, just probably not for the reasons that they may think.

*Midnight Cowboy* tells the story of Joe Buck, a small-town dishwasher and wannabe hustler from the American west, who constantly dresses in classic cowboy attire. Buck makes his way to New York City, in an attempt to make it as a "hustler" (or male prostitute). In this way, the film's setting (also in the late 1960s) serves as a reversal of the traditional American Western, from a geographical perspective, as the Western frontier of opportunity has now been reversed into Buck's journey eastward. Rather than open prairie that is ready to be farmed and settled, Buck, instead, finds himself in a highly industrialized and developed landscape. In his article, "Closing the (Heterosexual) Frontier: *Midnight Cowboy* as National Allegory," Kevin Floyd argues that "Joe's bus ride east in his cowboy outfit also enacts a radical reversal of the imperial narrative of westward expansion. This same homosexualizing, urbanizing narrative of

detritorialization deflates what is arguably the most salient legitimizing figure for U.S. imperial nationalism in general and for the cold war state in particular” (102-103). This figure of American imperialism that Floyd describes is the cowboy, and his assessment of its deflation is accurate; however, it is my view that, despite the film’s act of deconstructing and deflating this image (i.e., a central formal aspect of traditional Westerns) it is the same frontier logic (or spirit of the Western), as outlined by Grandin, that leads Buck eastward to the new center of capital accumulation and the opportunities it promises. Floyd seems to overlook the film’s maintenance of the frontier logic of the Western, as he hints at a break with the genre—something that occurs due to his over-emphasis on its formal attributes, rather than its spirit.

*Midnight Cowboy*’s centering of frontier logic is hinted at from the film’s opening scene—one that also ties frontier ideology directly to the Western genre itself. In her article, “John Schlesinger’s Bildungsfilm: *Midnight Cowboy* and the Problem of Youth,” Julia Prewitt Brown describes the significance of this opening scene:

The film opens with a shot of a blank screen. ... A lone child wearing a cowboy hat and sitting astride a rocking horse appears in the drive-in's playground beneath the screen.

What story is being told in these images? As critics have often pointed out, it is that of a young man whose head has been filled from early childhood with the fantasies of Hollywood westerns. Before we hear the sound of gunfire, however, we see a blank screen, suggesting ... the inchoate nature of consciousness before it processes impressions. ... Consciousness emerges out of nothingness, yet has a prehistory that is essential to it—in this case, the prehistory of American cinema. (Brown 651)

Brown’s analysis here is spot on, and *Midnight Cowboy*’s meta-references to the Western genre certainly help to indicate Schlesinger’s view of frontier ideology. However, throughout the rest

of the film, these references to the formalistic components of the Western all but disappear. Thus, Schlesinger, by highlighting the formalistic components of the Western, only to later negate them, is, in fact, stressing the ideological spirit of the Western, as he seeks to illustrate how this spirit lives on within Buck's contemporary lifestyle.

One can better understand how this reversal of the physical location of the frontier that Buck pursues might still be understood as inhabiting this spirit of the Western by looking to Susan Kollin's book, *Captivating Westerns: The Middle East in the American West*. In this book, Kollin argues that "the western was never merely regional or necessarily located in spaces associated with the present-day West but was always based in a geography that continually shifted, partly because, at one moment or another, all regions of the United States have had the opportunity to 'claim their time as the frontier'" (Kollin 35). By highlighting the fabricated nature of all attempts at geographically labeling any space as being "western," Kollin helps to underline the inherently ideological nature of the concept of the frontier—something that, due to its origins in capitalism (at least in America, as Grandin highlights), is constantly shifting.

Kollin further demonstrates the effect that the recognition of the ideological nature of the Western frontier has had on scholarship, citing Ella Shohat and other scholars in Ethnic Studies whose work "deterritorializes regions as stable objects of study, and offers new angles on the ongoing critique of the essentialist fixity of East-versus-West and North-versus-South" (66). It is this process of deterritorialization and destabilization that is evident in *Midnight Cowboy*, and that highlights its connection to Teo's notion of the spirit of the Western, despite its 1960s setting, and its lack of many formal similarities to more traditional American Westerns (other than Buck's cowboy garb and the opening's meta-Western references, which function mostly as

a pastiche of the formalistic components of the Western and grow less prominent as the film goes on).

Once Joe Buck makes his way to New York City, he is quickly faced with the brutality of contemporary capitalism in its highly-developed, late-1960s state in America—an era that, viewers quickly realize, has, in many ways, left behind working class men like Buck who, in more traditional Westerns, may have worked as cowboys on the frontier. This fact is played with by Schlesinger, through his decision to center Buck's preoccupation with cowboys. Thus, Schlesinger offers commentary on the American Western's supposed demise, while also aligning this loss of the image of the traditional Western frontier of opportunity to the precarious state of working-class men, like Buck, within a developed and high-tech capitalistic economy.

Through this approach, Schlesinger is able to sever the film's ties to the formalistic expectations of the Western genre, while also offering commentary on his reasons for doing so—reasons rooted in a desire to accurately represent the functioning of the Western spirit, in the form of frontier ideology, within the era in which the film takes place. In this era, the precursor to the neoliberal shift in society that would take place in the early 1970s, the frontier of opportunity, as dictated by financialized capital, exists in a constantly fluid state that is dictated by the whims of a sped-up, consumer-based business cycle. Thus, rather than the pursuit of land on a physical frontier, working people, like Joe, are forced to pursue the disembodied frontier of capital—a frontier that can only be accessed through the constant trading of their own physical body and personal labor, and by grappling with the constant displacement that is inevitably faced as one tries to sell this labor for a high enough cost to maintain a decent standard of living.

As *Midnight Cowboy* progresses, Joe meets a conman nicknamed Ratso, with whom he forms a close friendship, despite their initially rocky start, after Ratso attempts to scam him. The

two men essentially lead homeless lives, with only each other for support. Returning to Floyd's article, one can see, again, how he accurately captures the dynamics of the film's deterritorialization of the frontier, as well as its depictions of late-1960s capitalism, while, at the same time, failing to note how these traits might be seen as a continuation of the frontier logic of the Western, rather than as a break with it. Floyd writes, "throughout the film the motion of wrecking balls and images of condemned or destroyed Manhattan buildings and landscapes—the detritus ... capital's 'creative destruction' leaves in its wake—intermingle in montage-like fashion with the electronic advertisements that hover above Times Square" (Floyd 116). He goes on to say, "the contradictory filmic space Joe and Ratso negotiate is more abstract and global than the film's literal setting, less 'Times Square' or 'New York City' than the brilliant, dynamic ugliness of capitalism itself" (117). Floyd's description perfectly captures life under the shift toward neoliberalism that Joe and Ratso find themselves within; however, it is my view that the film's 'abstract and global' setting' should be seen as an accurate representation of the era's new form of frontier logic, and, therefore, should be directly tied to the Western genre—a connection that Floyd fails to illuminate.

This connection becomes even clearer, near the end of the film, as, eventually, due to Ratso's health issues, and his dreams of someday moving to Florida, the two men decide to do just that, making their way by bus down to The Sunshine State. They end up making it to their destination, although Ratso dies on the bus ride down. While he is on the bus, one can see that Joe no longer sports cowboy gear. By having Joe and Ratso abandon NYC for another supposed frontier of opportunity, Schlesinger, again, helps to illustrate the highly destabilized nature of the frontier under late-1960s American capitalism. At the same time, despite the frontier logic of the Western living on in his characters' minds, Schlesinger shows, by the end of the film, the almost

complete disappearance of any formalistic remnants of the Western genre, through Joe's decision to leave his cowboy clothes behind. In this way, *Midnight Cowboy* begins to offer an image of how the spirit of the Western will continue to live on under the soon-to-come era of neoliberalism, and, as Fisher highlights, the further intensification of this era under capitalist realism.

At the same time, one can see that the frontier logic governing Buck and Ratso's journey to Florida is the same as that which governed Buck's initial journey eastward to NYC. And one is left to wonder Buck will find any more stability and fulfillment in Florida than he did in NYC. As Stanley Corkin writes in his article, "Sex and the City in Decline: *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *Klute* (1971),"

Joe and Bree [the lead character in *Klute*] assume that proximity to the centers of commerce that drive the nation's economy will provide opportunity. However, this view employs a perspective that was far more appropriate in the 1920s than in the late 1960s and 1970s. With the advent of modern systems of communication and transportation, the role of cities had shifted significantly and would continue to shift, from centers of all phases of productive enterprise to nexuses of communication that coordinate the far-flung components of such enterprises. New York, in the late 1960s and in the 1970s, was in a moment of transition, one caused by the shift from a regional and then national division of labor to a global means of organization. (Corkin 622)

Given Corkin's description of the off-shoring of production in the neoliberal era, as well as Buck's dire straits in both Texas and NYC, it is tough to imagine Buck will fare any better in Florida. Despite this fact, he ends the film with the same mindset as he began it with—one that seeks out economic opportunity through the chasing of a new frontier.

Thus, if one views this film as a Western (as it has often been classified), I believe it is mostly because of its inhabitation of the spirit of the Western, in the form of frontier logic, rather than because of the film's miniscule amount of formalistically Western aspects, which, by the end of the film, have all but disappeared. As I will show, through an analysis of *Spring Breakers*, the spirit of the Western and its frontier ideology are shown to be even more all-encompassing in this contemporary film, while, conversely, it offers no formalistic references to the Western genre of old.

### **Spring Breakers & the Western Under Capitalist Realism**

Even when considered through the highly flexible lens of the post-Western or late Western, classifying *Spring Breakers* as a Western may still appear to be a bit of a stretch; however, if one keeps in mind the spirit of the Western, in the form of the contemporary manifestation of a deterritorialized frontier logic that is rooted in a constant pursuit of capital accumulation and commodity signs, then this connection will become more visible.

Directed by infamous American auteur, Harmony Korine, the film was released in 2013. The film tells the story of four cash-strapped female college students: Faith, Candy, Brit, and Cotty, who find themselves feeling left behind as their college campus grows deserted during spring break. This leads them (excluding Faith) to decide to rob a local restaurant with squirt guns. The other girls succeed and convince Faith to join them on their trip down to Saint Petersburg, Florida, on a party bus. Once the girls arrive, a blur of constant, out-of-control partying ensues, and things quickly get out of hand, leading to their arrest.

Despite the fact that this opening plot may sound like a somewhat stereotypical (albeit dark) teen film, this could not be further from the truth. Due to the film's uniqueness, many

critics have found themselves confused, when it comes to trying to understand its message. In his review of the film for *Cineaste Magazine*, Thomas Doherty writes,

The sentient spectator has copped to the fact that *Spring Breakers* is not a narrative meant to intersect with youth culture, criminal conduct, or any zone of the (non-MTV) real world. Except for the soundtrack tunes—contemporary hardcore rap, vintage Britney Spears—the film exists outside the realm of history and politics and lives as an exercise in video game pastiche and postmodern distancing. (Doherty 46)

While some audience members may, mistakenly, experience *Spring Breakers* in the way described here by Doherty, this does not mean that the film actually exists in this way. What analyses like Doherty's miss is the fact that the world of "pastiche and postmodern distancing" that Korine crafts is, in fact, the real world his characters find themselves in (i.e., the world of youth culture under capitalist realism). As Danielle B. Schwartz notes in, "'You Look Good Wearing My Future': Resisting Neoliberalism in John Hughes's *Pretty in Pink* and *Some Kind of Wonderful*," the act of centering "the facet of neoliberalism first identified by Michel Foucault—a neoliberal rationality—rather than other facets, such as purely economic articulations of neoliberalism or the legitimate forms that economic power take—provides an avenue of analysis from which to ascertain a fruitful conception of a particular neoliberal subject" (380). Thus, in order to accurately represent life under neoliberalism (or its latest iteration, capitalist realism), one must seek not only to depict the broader cultural and economic landscape, but also aim to depict this neoliberal rationality and subjectivity itself. As Schwartz goes on to write, "The new subject of neoliberalism, importantly, is productive. Subjects themselves become capital, in which they must self-invest in order to be that much more productive. The subject as enterprise, capital, or entrepreneur takes part in the never-ending cycle of production and self-regulation,

much like every other sphere that has been touched by free market rationality” (383). In other words, the subjectivities of the characters in *Spring Breakers* are, themselves, ingrained within the economic logic of capitalist realism. Thus, we should understand Doherty’s failure to grasp the chaotic nature of contemporary capitalistic society as integral to his misunderstanding of youth culture depicted in the film.

A similar misreading of *Spring Breakers* is evident in Richard Alleva’s review of the film for *Commonweal Magazine*. Alleva writes,

Korine's filmmaking evokes the mystical. ... The film's style recalls Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*. In both films, we hear the characters repeating certain phrases over and over on the soundtrack. ... But [*The*] *Tree of Life* employs such devices to meditate dreamily on the human condition, to delve beneath surfaces and get at the thoughts, yearnings, and fantasies of its characters. The disjunctions and repetitions are intended to communicate a sense of spiritual life. What has spiritual life got to do with Korine's spring breakers, with their vacuous faces, toneless voices, clichéd babblings, and affectless sexuality? (Alleva)

While Alleva does a good job of describing the film’s aesthetics, and how they differ from what one might expect of a vapid teen film, he fails to accurately read Korine’s reasoning behind deciding to blend the two seemingly disparate worlds of the spiritual arthouse film and a teen movie about spring break—something that, as discussed, I believe is rooted in Korine’s awareness of capitalist realism, and how, within this new epoch, the pursuit of a narrow sense of commodified self-fulfillment is seen as encompassing all of life’s possibilities. Thus, these devices still do “meditate dreamily on the human condition” within *Spring Breakers*; this

condition is just shown to be vapid, to allow for nothing beyond the pursuit of a frontier logic expressed by a dog-eat-dog world of mindless entertainment and distraction.

In her article, “Deleuze, Zizek, *Spring Breakers* and the Question of Ethics in Late Capitalism,” Jenny Gunn does an excellent job of describing the workings of neoliberal logic in *Spring Breakers*, while also comparing the film to the 1970s youth counterculture film, *Zabriskie Point*. Gunn writes, “Like *Spring Breakers*’ take on the collegiate spring break, *Zabriskie Point* ultimately portrays the hippie movement as an unsustainable fantasy but one that Antonioni nevertheless asks us to take seriously. Also like *Zabriskie Point*, *Spring Breakers* considers the relationship of its utopian fantasy to capitalism” (Gunn 100). Despite these similarities between the two films, Gunn goes on to highlight their differences, saying,

unlike the hippies of *Zabriskie Point*, for the neoliberal subjects of *Spring Breakers*, the logics of utopia and capitalism are no longer diametrically opposed. ... In other words, Korine’s film suggests that for the neoliberal subject of late capitalism, the real high, the highest high, is no longer found in the fantasy of the collective utopian orgy but rather in the driven and competitive pursuit of capital gain. (Gunn 100-101)

Gunn is spot on in this assessment, and, in particular, her description of the neoliberal adolescent subject of late capitalism (or capitalist realism) perfectly describes the ways in which the frontier spirit of the Western, in the form of a brutal drive for capital accumulation, has come to dominate the psyche of America’s youth—something that, as discussed, I believe has the consequence of rendering *Spring Breakers* a Western.

Keeping in mind the dynamics laid out by these examples, of a quest for both spirituality and utopia that is drowned out by capitalist realism, one is better able to understand the significance of the rest of the film’s events. In particular, it is important to focus on the character

of Faith (played by Selena Gomez), as she is the sole character who shows some resistance to the ideological forces around her.

Early in the film, Candy, Brit, and Cotty are shown to suffer from what Fisher terms capitalist realism's effect of "depressive hedonia" (21). Fisher writes of this novel form of depression,

depression is usually characterized by a state of anhedonia, but the condition I'm referring to is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it [is] by an inability to do anything *except* pursue pleasure. There is a sense that 'something is missing'—but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed *beyond* the pleasure principle. (Fisher 21-22)

This "inability to do anything *except* pursue pleasure" is shown, at the beginning of the film, to manifest itself in the form of cynicism and hedonism in Candy, Brit, and Cotty. Faith, in contrast, seems to seek a sense of meaning and purpose through evangelical Christianity. She is shown at a youth group singing hymns with other young Christians; however, Korine makes it clear, through Faith's absent gaze, and wandering attention, that whatever meaning this form of charismatic faith had once brought her is no longer sufficient.

Soon after these opening scenes, Faith agrees to join the other girls on their spring break trip, bringing her into direct contact with the frontier logic they abide by, as well as this logic's effect, in the form of depressive hedonia. Inklings of these traits can be seen bubbling up in Faith, as she says, in a voice over phone call to her grandma, that "this trip is about more than spring break; it's about the chance to see something different." Faith is no longer content with the world around her; she has tasted the logic of the frontier, and the pleasure it promises.

Despite this fact, Faith continues to serve as an excellent illustration of the liminality offered by adolescent subjects, and, thus, the interesting rendition of the alternative Western offered by *Spring Breakers*—one where certain characters, like Faith, have yet to become fully formed neoliberal (or capitalist realist) subjects. This liminal space that Faith occupies allows *Spring Breakers* to contain a critique of the very frontier logic it demonstrates. Faith's liminality is further evidenced once the girls are down in Florida and find themselves partying day and night. One night, as they are all alone in the pool in a rare moment of silence, Faith says that she wishes she could freeze time. The other girls laugh at her, which seems to bother her. They understand that the point of robbing money and traveling to Florida for Spring Break was not to make a stable new life for themselves, rather, it was the pursuit of endless pleasure and capital—a pursuit, driven by frontier logic, that is inherently ongoing. In contrast, Faith still seeks a life of meaning and stability and has yet to be fully enveloped by this frontier logic. In this way, Faith demonstrates the urge to settle down on the frontier—something that the disembodied nature of the frontier under capitalist realism makes impossible.

After the girls find themselves arrested for the possession of cocaine at a party, they are bailed out of jail by a rapper, and real-life gangster, named Alien (played by James Franco). Alien convinces the girls to join him in his car, and, later, to go to a party with his friends. While the other girls gleefully go along with Alien's desires, Faith's hesitancy is further heightened. She flees the party crying and, when Alien confronts her, says she wants to go home. Alien agrees to let her go but tells her that her friends are staying with him.

Alien, I believe, should be seen as the physical manifestation of frontier logic under capitalist realism. When asked what he does, he says that he's all about making money (he even has a tattoo of the dollar symbol). It is no accident that Korine decides to make Alien a part-time

rapper, with lyrics and a persona that would fit right in with top forty radio hits of the 2010s. Fisher writes, in *Capitalist Realism*, of the social significance of the popularity of this sort of gangster persona in hip-hop: “for much hip hop, any ‘naïve’ hope that youth culture could change anything has been replaced by the hard-headed embracing of a brutally reductive version of ‘reality’” (Fisher 10). Thus, when directly confronted by this brutal ideology, in the form of Alien, Faith, from her liminal position, is still able to choose, at least temporarily, to turn away from the worldview he represents—something symbolized by her decision to return to college alone, leaving her friends behind.

At the same time, the other girls are enveloped even more fully into this contemporary manifestation of frontier logic, as they work alongside Alien, and go on to become full-fledged criminals, eventually committing serious robberies and murders. After the girls are shown committing numerous crimes, Cotty is eventually forced to leave, due to her being shot; however, her character is never shown to have any real remorse or second thoughts as to her actions, or the logic governing said actions. Meanwhile, Candy and Brit stay in Saint Petersburg, and eventually murder Alien’s drug-gang rivals—including, his arch nemesis, Big Arch—in a shoot-out (one that Alien, himself, dies during).

It is noteworthy that Korine never returns to the character of Faith, once she leaves spring break behind. This leads one to wonder whether she ever will be able to fully escape frontier logic and the grips of capitalist realism, or to find self-actualization through some other method. Conversely, Candy and Brit are the two characters featured at the film’s close, where they are shown driving off into the sunset. Returning to Jenny Gunn’s article, “Deleuze, Zizek, *Spring Breakers* and the Question of Ethics in Late Capitalism,” she writes of this final scene,

with the deaths of both of these hetero-patriarchal personifications of capital at the end of *Spring Breakers*, a fragment of hope may be born. As a feminine alternative to the masculine logic of global capitalism, Candy and Brit ride off into the sunset together no longer under Alien's yoke. But is this truly an alternative? The fact that Candy and Brit keep Big Arch's Lamborghini as a souvenir of their spring break debauchery – and the sports car being perhaps the status symbol of the capitalist – makes the ending of the film somewhat ambivalent. (Gunn 109)

Gunn's reading of this scene feels very off, as it ignores the fact that both Candy and Brit already found themselves governed by a brutal and materialistic logic, from the film's very beginning—in fact, it was this very logic that caused them to rob a restaurant in order to go to Florida in the first place. By failing to see spring break itself as representative, within the film, of a mindset (one that, I have shown, is aligned with that of the Western frontier), Gunn mistakes Candy and Brit's further entrapment in frontier logic as, instead, a form of escape.

Thus, while the ending of the film may be considered ambivalent, to the extent that the viewer does not know what, exactly, is next for Brit and Candy, Korine makes it quite clear that, for them, frontier logic has won out. In this way, the girls riding off into the distance in this stolen Lamborghini should be seen as a contemporary version of the classic Western vision of a cowboy or gunman riding by horseback off into the open frontier that awaits him. However, in this contemporary rendition, the notion of a new geographic destination has been replaced with a deterritorialized and internalized version of frontier logic. As Alien repeats in voice-overs throughout the film, it is the mantra of “spring break forever” (or the endless pursuit of pleasure and capital) that is the new frontier. In other words, spring break, just like the Western frontier, was never really a destination; it was always a mindset.

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“The Shipwreck is Certain”: Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* as a Roadmap for Resistance in the  
Era of Globalization-Minus

In his novel, *The Overstory*, Richard Powers follows the lives of nine characters, on seemingly disparate paths, who are all brought together by their love for, and connection with, trees. The actions most of these characters take, as ever more militant environmental activists, are unable to bring about change, and this leads most of them to go into hiding. While this may sound like yet another bleak story, where activism fails to defeat the destructive forces causing environmental degradation, what Powers is, in fact, showing his readers is that the prevalent, human-centric modes of protest and of thinking about said degradation are not adequate. Powers attempts to demonstrate a way out of this anthropocentric mindset by framing the failures of his five major activist characters within an intellectual groundwork laid down by two other characters who always dwell on the periphery of the novel—a scientist named Patricia Westerford and programmer named Neelay—both of whom find their efforts thwarted, as they attempt to directly challenge, and then to escape from, the environmental crisis and its societal effects. Thus, they are both driven to reimagine their place in the world.

Powers’ approach to the dynamics of the environmental crisis in *The Overstory* aligns very well with French Philosopher, Bruno Latour’s, argument in his book, *Down To Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. In this book, Latour says that humanity’s failure to adequately confront the climate crisis is tied to our inability to note the fact that we now find ourselves in what he terms a “new climatic regime,” or, in a situation where the natural environment’s act of pushing back against human activity has now become the primary agent of change within the biosphere. In other words, we have moved beyond the Anthropocene, and into its aftermath, and any feasible path forward will have to recognize this fact.

Latour argues that our inability to move to this accurate framework for understanding the climate crisis has been largely due to the prevalence of a system of governance he calls “globalization-minus” (Latour 2). In explaining globalization-minus, he writes, “shifting from a local to a global viewpoint ought to mean multiplying viewpoints, registering a greater number of varieties, taking into account a larger number of beings, cultures, phenomena, organisms, and people” (Latour 12-13). However, he believes that “It seems as though what is meant by globalization today is the exact opposite of such an increase. The term is used to mean that a single vision ... proposed by a few individuals, representing a very small number of interests ... has been imposed on everyone and spread everywhere” (Latour 12-13). Latour traces this homogenized sameness to the imposition of market forces on the entire world by powerful nation states (especially, the U.S.) in the aftermath of the end of the cold war—something that propagated a dreamland of endless market growth, predicated on a belief in unlimited natural resources. This ideology, he believes, is central to society’s continued inability to fully grapple with human-caused climate change. Latour goes on to argue that this system has come to admit its own untenability, as evidenced by the recent global increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric and the upward transfer of wealth. Faced with the reality of an ever-decreasing supply of available land and resources, due to the pushback against human activity by the environment itself, Latour believes that powerful nation states now use anti-immigration rhetoric and anti-solidarity policies as a method of defense. In his view, this is in response to the realization, on the part of ruling elites, that “if they wanted to survive in comfort, they had to stop pretending, even in their dreams, to share the earth with the rest of the world” (19).

*The Overstory*’s alignment with Latour’s thought is best found by tracing the character arcs of Neelay and Patricia. Powers introduces the character of Neelay as “The Boy Who’ll Help

Change humans into other creatures” (114). He then writes of Neelay’s crushed tech-utopian dreams, “by his eighteenth birthday, paradise is sprouting fences. Former philanthropists of free code start taking out copyright and making actual coin. ... The commons are getting enclosed” (Powers 135). After Neelay’s hopes regarding technology’s ability to solve humanity’s economic problems fade, he experiences a new source of inspiration—one grounded in the vision of trees. In Stanford University’s quad one evening, he feels as if “On all sides, furious green speculations wave at him. ... The alien invaders insert a thought directly into his limbic system. There will be a game, a billion times richer than anything yet made. ... The game will put its players smack in the middle of a living ... world desperately in need of the players’ help” (Powers 139). It is not until years later, when Neelay’s game has become a global phenomenon, that he realizes his inability to craft a new world outside of the commodifying market forces he initially sought to escape. A fellow gamer says to him “know what’s wrong with this place? Midas problem, people build shit until the place fills up. Then you gods just make another continent or introduce new weapons” (Powers 470). This realization that he has simply crafted an inaccurate, digital version of the earth (one that also feeds upon globalization-minus’ dream of endless growth) eventually leads Neelay to turn back toward the natural world.

Patricia follows a similar path. Her insights into the agency of nature as a child lead her to get a PhD in forestry, and to publish research concluding that “the biochemical behavior of individual trees may make sense only when we see them as members of a community” (Powers 158). This view is seen as very controversial, and it leads top scholars in her field to attempt to debunk her, tarnishing her reputation. She decides to live off the grid and work as a park groundskeeper and realizes that “angry people who hated wildness took away her career. ... What frightens people most will one day turn to wonder. And then people will do what four billion

years have shaped them to do: stop and see just what it is they're seeing" (Powers 163). However, just as Neelay's attempt to create a utopian cyber world is proven unviable, so is Patricia's attempt to lead a life removed from the self-centered culture of humanity. Powers signifies the inevitability of her failure, when, one day, while looking out over a forest, she sees "condos, a few days old, cut through several acres of the root system of one of earth's most lavish things. ... She sees it in one glimpse of flashing gold: trees and humans at war over the land and the water and the atmosphere. And she can hear ... which side will lose by winning" (167). Neelay and Patricia represent different strains of escapist thought under globalization-minus, and Powers demonstrates, through their failures at escaping the effects of this ideology, the futility of attempting to remove oneself from the new climatic regime we find ourselves in. It is only through their reorientation toward what Latour calls the terrestrial reactor that Neelay and Patricia can begin to effect real change.

Latour elaborates on the terrestrial reactor's impacts: "the current disorientation derives entirely from the emergence of an actor that reacts ... to human actions and that bars the modernizers from knowing where they are, in what epoch, and especially what role they need to play from now on" (41). This reactor is the natural world itself, pushing back against decades of human activity; and this resistance now serves as the primary agent of change in the biosphere. It is an inability to let go of the blind belief in the myths of endless economic growth and anthropocentrism that has led to the disorientation many people experience when confronted with this fact. Even those who attempt to fight back against environmental destruction, or to remove themselves from globalization-minus, while retaining a focus that places primary emphasis on the actions of humanity, and on our own status as a geological agent, experience

this same sense of disorientation, as they, too, fail to note the terrestrial reactor, and the ways in which the natural world now dictates any future path for humanity.

In their introduction to a special issue of *Narrative Culture*, titled, “Experiencing the More-than-Human World,” Michaela Finske and Martha Norkunas describe the important role that narrative can play when it comes to changing both human consciousness and society, saying, “as literary animal studies and ecocriticism have argued, there is a link between narrating and doing, between fiction and facts, and between stories and lives. . . . Narratives in their diverse forms and genres act as a force within social systems” (Finske and Norkunas 105-106). They elaborate on this notion of narrative as a source of social change by pointing out how “The remembered meanings of nature, for example, as represented by a person’s narrative of her or his life, will change as the social meanings of human–nonhuman relationships change. In this sense, storytellers not only reflect their specific realities but also create them” (106). Keeping in mind this world-making power of narrative, we might better understand Latour’s emphasis on the central role that storytelling must occupy within human efforts to reorient themselves toward the terrestrial reactor. Latour is adamant that any successful approach to storytelling under the new climatic regime must be groundbreaking: “we can no longer tell ourselves the same old stories. . . . Take a new look at the age-old wisdom? Learn from the few cultures that have not yet been modernized? Yes, of course, but without lulling ourselves with illusions: for them, too, there is no precedent” (Latour 44). As discussed, the lack of precedent for narrative within this situation is rooted in the extreme decentering of humanity that must take place under the new climatic regime—something that will greatly alter the types of stories humans should tell themselves about the world, if they intend to accurately capture reality.

Powers endorses this view of the importance of crafting new forms of narrative, in order to successfully confront the environmental crisis. He shows the activists in his novel take part in the lumber protests in Oregon in the 1990s, where they become drawn toward pre-modern strains of thought, before later finding ways to update these approaches for the moment at hand. One of these characters, a young college dropout named Olivia, finds herself suddenly being spoken to by the natural world, and later sees protesters chaining themselves to machinery on T.V. Powers describes her reaction, upon seeing this footage: “the presences light around her, singing new songs. The world starts here. This is the merest beginning. Life can do anything” (206). Olivia interprets this vision as asking her to join the protests.

When Olivia arrives in Oregon, the protest camp’s leader, Mother N, directly ties the group’s actions to indigenous and earth-centric forms of protest, saying, “we’re part of a very long, very broad process. ... If those beautiful Chipko women in India can let themselves get threatened and beaten, if Brazilian Kayapo Indians can put their lives on the line, so can we” (Powers 266). Powers’ decision to spell out these connections to indigenous movements, in the minds of the protestors in his novel, draws an interesting parallel with recent events like the #NoDAPL movement that took place in 2016-2017. In his book, *Our History Is the Future*, Lakota Historian, Nick Estes, traces #NoDAPL to a deep history of Indigenous resistance. Estes explains how a renewed focus on indigenous beliefs is necessary to our survival. He writes, “many Lakotatayapi nouns, like ‘Mni Sose’, indicate not merely static, inanimate form, but also action. In this landscape, water is animated and has agency; it streams as liquid, forms clouds as gas, and even moves earth as solid ice—because it is alive and gives life” (Estes 9). From this quote, one can already see parallels with Latour and Powers’ focus on nature’s agency, and the need to turn away from westernized forms of thought. Estes goes on to argue that simply shifting

our way of thinking toward a more nature-centric or indigenous view of the world is not adequate, when it comes to confronting our current crisis, further paralleling Latour's call to reorient these views toward the moment at hand—i.e., toward the terrestrial reactor.

Powers illustrates the need for this reorientation by showing Olivia's actions to be a misreading of the natural world's desires, as she is killed in an accidental explosion on a logging company's site that her fledgling activist group tries to burn down. Powers writes, "Olivia's face twists up in terror, like an ambushed mare. As clearly as if she speaks the words out loud ... something's wrong. I've been shown what happens, and this isn't it" (438). While Olivia's vision of nature's agency was correct, her attempts at change failed to move beyond an anthropocentric paradigm—one where humans, the cause of environmental destruction, attempt to put an end to said destruction, and to shape the biosphere in a different direction. This approach misunderstands the radical decentering of humanity that will need to take place under the new climatic regime. Powers shows us that, upon hearing the natural world's voice, as Olivia does, we should continue to watch and listen, to learn where it wants to go with the future, rather than to leap right into old modes of anthropocentric thought and protest. We can no longer pretend that the future of the planet is about humans.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Powers says: "we are incredibly good at psychological and political dramas, but there's another kind of drama—between the humans and the non-humans. ... And until you resolve that question, how do we live coherently at home on this planet, the other two kinds of stories are luxuries" (John). Understanding this question as being at the core of *The Overstory* offers some clarification as to its current place within eco-fiction. In Eoin Flannery's article, "Ecocriticism," he describes Timothy Clark's book, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, in ways that largely

interact with the thought of Latour and Powers. He cites Clark as saying, “the ‘norms’ we in the Global North have established, inherited, and continue to live by are ... poisonous agents, extensions of our own desires that offer nothing assured other than the destruction of the biosphere” (Flannery 422). When it comes to crafting narratives that properly take this fact into account, Clark believes that “scale effects in particular defy sensuous representation or any plot confined, say, to human-to-human dramas and intentions, demanding new, innovative modes of writing that have yet to convincingly to emerge” (Flannery 422). I believe that Powers begins to meet the challenges of accurately capturing the scale effects that Clark describes, as, despite telling us a story of human-centered relationships and forms of protest, he frames these actions and relationships within the landscape itself, giving immense focus to the agency of the natural world.

Claire Miye Stanford, in her *Los Angeles Times* book review of *The Overstory*, does an excellent job of describing how Powers goes about capturing these scale effects of the natural world. She argues that Powers achieves “what environmental philosopher Val Plumwood calls ‘a thorough and open rethink of the way we—humans—represent nonhuman nature ... [and] nonhuman life’” (Stanford). Stanford goes on to say that in *The Overstory* nature “has its own agency: streams scour, salmon spawn, plants huddle in secret, while the trees protect all this teeming life below” (Stanford). She continues, describing Powers’ “mission statement or, perhaps, its formal defense” as being that “a novel need not privilege human character and human emotion in order to justify its existence” (Stanford). Stanford’s argument here is spot on, as one can see Powers’ efforts at this rethink and mission statement in action, from the very opening of the novel, when he writes, “the tree is saying things, in words before words. ... It says: a good answer must be reinvented many times, from scratch. ... Close your eyes and think

of willow. The weeping you see will be wrong. ... All the ways you imagine us ... are always amputations. ... That's the trouble with people, their root problem. Life runs alongside them, unseen" (Powers 4). Here, Powers writes from the perspective of trees themselves, and uses their voice as a framing device for the actions his characters take. He continues this approach throughout the novel, continuously situating the dramas, hardships, and joys of his characters' lives within descriptions of the natural world's agency. Thus, Powers allows his novel to be less grounded in the actions of humans, and more so in the life and potential future that "runs alongside them, unseen."

Powers' emphasis on the natural world's primacy, when it comes to accurately capturing the new climatic regime, is also evident within his descriptions of human subjectivity. In his article, "*The Overstory*: taking the measure of a major new American novel," Jonathan Arac argues that Powers depicts "an abasement of the human before the overwhelming power of arboreal nature, syntactically signaled by the overloading of nouns" (143). Arac illustrates this fact through the following passage from *The Overstory*:

Patricia learns what a forest can do. Shafts of sunlight cut through the vine-covered trunks, the wildest engines of life on earth. Species clog every surface, reviving the dead metaphor at the heart of the word bewilderment. All is fringe and braid and pleat, scales and spines. She fights to tell trees from lanyard strands of liana, orchid, sheets of moss, bromeliad, sprays of giant fern, mats of algae. (Arac 142)

Thus, Powers is able to maintain a clear argument, regarding the primacy of the natural world under the new climatic regime, throughout *The Overstory*. He does so while capturing said argument within his approach to both language and narrative. This, he achieves, even while moving between passages from the viewpoint of the landscape itself and those that center human

subjectivity. In this way, *The Overstory* articulates an important, and often forgotten, point regarding human efforts to face the ecological crisis: these efforts must involve both a rethinking of our understanding of nature, as well as of what it means to be human.

Powers' approach toward eco-fiction is in sharp contrast to the dystopian trend that has come to dominate the genre in recent years. In "Eco-Dystopias: Nature and the Dystopian Imagination," Rowland Hughes and Pat Wheeler argue,

Though we are not yet at the stage of environmental apocalypse ... it is certainly true that climate change is most commonly ... communicated in the language of disaster, which seems to provide the most compelling ... means of persuading its audience, not only of the devastation being wreaked upon global ecosystems, but of the human consequences of that devastation. (Hughes and Wheeler 2)

This argument fails to note the problems posed by the intrinsically anthropocentric nature most of this dystopian writing takes on. Powers avoids the traps of dystopia by decentering human concerns for terrestrial ones, making it clear that the world will live on without humans and, if humans would like to continue surviving, they need to listen to the earth, rather than centering their own actions.

I would like to return to the characters of Patricia and Neelay, at the close of *The Overstory*, to further illustrate Powers' effectiveness at simultaneously turning our emphasis toward the agency of nature, while also driving home the fact that our becoming passive bystanders under globalization-minus will not suffice, if we are to survive. Patricia is drawn back into society after her research is vindicated. She delivers a speech to environmentalists, saying, "at some point over the last four hundred million years, some plant has tried every strategy with a remote chance of working. We're just beginning to realize how varied a thing working might

be. Life has a way of talking to the future. ... To solve the future, we must save the past” (Powers 566). She continues, “Trees are the earth’s endless effort to speak to the listening heaven. ... People could be the heaven that the earth is trying to speak to. ... If we knew what green wanted, we wouldn’t have to choose between the earth’s interests and ours. They’d be the same!” (568). In this call for a radical reorientation of humanity’s mindset toward a trust in the natural world’s ability to guide us to what it needs from us, and away from attempts to simply tailor our own agency in a less harmful way, or to attempt to fix the environment, Powers demonstrates the radical turn toward the terrestrial reactor that Latour calls for, and moves beyond the anthropocentric constraints common to eco-fiction.

Neelay’s actions, at the novel’s close, build upon Patricia’s, and show Powers’ optimistic views on the role that technology can play in helping us to be the “heaven that the earth is trying to speak to.” Neelay comes to see how he previously misunderstood what the natural world wanted from him. He sees a video that shows a time lapse of decades of photos of a family tree, and thinks: “code—wildly branching code pruned back by failure—builds up this great spiraling column from out of instructions that Vishnu managed to cram into something smaller than a boy’s fingernail” (543). He realizes that the technology he has created could be applied to help humanity better understand the natural world’s learned processes and hardwired agency (its code), and takes a new approach with his career, beginning a venture that is aimed at engaging with the natural world, rather than retreating from it or looking to artificially replicate it. Powers writes of “the learners” (600) that Neelay codes into existence (a form of web-and-database-scouring artificial intelligence): “the new creations head off to scout the globe, and the code spreads outward. ... All of them sharing a single goal: to find out how big life is, how connected, and what it would take for people to unisicide” (600). Powers shows us that technology, with its

ability to move at speeds and ranges unavailable to the human mind, could be able to understand the natural world and its aims more fully, offering us a clearer understanding of the radical shift that must take place in our approach and mindset if we are possibly going to “unsuicide.”

*The Overstory* doesn't offer any fixed answers, but it does show us a sense of hope—one that will involve our placing trust in the natural world, as well as being open to entirely new definitions of what it means to live on this planet. As Latour argues, it is only through reorienting ourselves toward the terrestrial, and attempting to understand the agency of the natural world, and the path it would like to take, in its pushing back against human activity, that we can prepare ourselves to survive under the continuous changes in our biosphere to come. As Powers writes in the novel's closing pages, “the fires will come, despite all efforts, the blight and windthrow and floods. Then the earth will become another thing, and people will learn it all over again” (622). With *The Overstory*, Powers has crafted a guidebook to help us begin this process of relearning.

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“Between the Modernists and the Medievalists”: Centering Conservatism’s Long-standing  
Crusade

In his book, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*, Bruce Holsinger argues that “September 11 immediately began to function as a kind of medievalizing engine in American political discourse, churning out an array of historical dualisms separating a modern West from a premodern world that had finally responded to the long arm of modernity with a morning of cataclysmic violence” (Holsinger 9). Holsinger illustrates this medievalizing process that he believes to have taken place through countless examples, such as an article from *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. Holsinger writes, “The global struggle made visible on September 11 must be understood not simply in terms of a political conflict between moderation and fanaticism, Friedman contended, but as a battle for the very historical soul of Islam—a battle waged across the region ‘between the modernists and the medievalists’” (Holsinger 3-4). While Holsinger is certainly correct in noting the rise in open references to medievalism, in the wake of 9/11, he fails to connect these arguments to the long-standing claims, made by conservatives, for a lineage between their own worldview and the middle ages. This lack of a broader context, on Holsinger’s part, leads him to view the rise in this form of rhetoric as a very sudden, and mistaken, form of argument from neoconservatives—one that he also sees as having ushered in equally perverse arguments from mainstream commentators, such as Friedman.

This paper seeks to fill in some of the historical and ideological gaps in Holsinger’s argument. In doing so, I demonstrate how the rise in post-9/11 medievalist rhetoric should be understood as a process of laying bare long-held conservative and neoconservative beliefs—something that the traumatic effects of 9/11 created a space for. By expanding upon the history and details of this conservative worldview, I illustrate how Holsinger’s characterization of recent

neoconservative references to medievalism as being mistaken outbursts (such as his description of George W. Bush's "thoughtless invocation of 'crusade'" (Holsinger 12)) can more accurately be understood as very knowing attempts to normalize some of the central tenets of contemporary American conservatism—especially, those that directly oppose enlightenment values. Thus, Holsinger is correct in arguing for the inaccuracy of Friedman's paradigm of the modernists versus the medievalists—just not for the reasons that he may think. Both Friedman and Holsinger fail to grapple with conservatism's long-standing alignment with medievalism—something that brings it into direct opposition with the enlightenment, and modernism, more broadly. The battle between the medievalists and the modernists is, in fact, taking place; however, it is being held within American culture itself.

As noted, while the mainstreaming of references to medievalism, on the part of neoconservatives, may be seen as a result of the traumatic events of 9/11, this language has a long history within the contours of the conservative movement itself. In his article, "Contemporary conservatism and medievalism: 'Nothing new under the sun'?" Milan Zafirovski argues that "Medievalism is typically considered by conservatives and their adversaries alike as conservatism's extant root, historical condition, precursor and even a perennial ideal of the 'good'-cum- 'godly' society" (227). Zafirovski goes on to illustrate that this view is not a new one, saying, "social theorists in particular suggest that early political and cultural conservatism in Europe arose from medieval religious orthodoxy in vehement reaction to and struggle against liberalism, notably the liberal-secular enlightenment" (228). Despite this fact, many contemporary theorists and thinkers, like Holsinger, fail to connect these beliefs with the American conservative movement. This has led, as demonstrated by Holsinger's quotes above, to the mischaracterization of neoconservative references to medievalism as a form of rhetoric that

has arisen suddenly and mistakenly, rather than as something deeply grounded in the history of conservatism in America. Zafirovski writes of this common mischaracterization of American conservatism,

America, contradicting received views, did not lack substantively or sociologically—as different from formally or legally—a ‘medieval institutional past’ or traditionalism, including a variation of aristocracy, oligarchy and theocracy, as in Puritan-ruled aristocratic-theocratic New England and the ante-bellum, semi-feudal, oligarchic and post-bellum fundamentalist or theocentric south. (Zafirovski 228)

By understanding American conservatism as having a long history of aligning itself with medievalism, as well as America, more broadly, as historically having medieval-inspired institutions, we might better see the labeling of America’s supposed enemies as medieval as having little to do with a juxtaposition of modernity and pre-modernity, as Friedman claims (and as Holsinger echoes throughout his book), and much more to do with the logic of a crusade, of the continued dynamic of a pre-enlightenment holy war, within the neoconservative mindset.

Part of what makes it so difficult to accurately assess the American conservative movement, and to understand its long-held belief in its own medievalism, is what Corey Robin, in *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*, describes as conservatism’s attempt to make the old seem new, in the hope of retaining, or restoring, hierarchy. Robin writes of conservatism’s inherently counterrevolutionary nature, “there is no better way to exercise power than to defend it against an enemy from below. Counterrevolution, in other words, is one of the ways in which the conservative makes feudalism seem fresh and medievalism modern” (Robin 29). In other words, despite its endorsement of many pre-enlightenment ideals, which amounts, largely, to an endorsement of hierarchy and subjugation,

the American conservative movement has often sought to make these retrograde views appear fresh and forward-thinking. Zafirovski describes this process, specifically as it pertains to neoconservatism:

American and British neo-conservatism, epitomized by Reaganism and Thatcherism, tends to portray and legitimate itself as completely novel, exceptional and revolutionary relative to medievalism, thereby styling itself as a sort of anti-medievalism. This is in contrast to European paleo-conservatism, including fascism, which typically admits, openly restores, and celebrates its medieval roots, aims, influences or links. (229)

The obscured nature of American conservatism's medieval ties, in particular, seems to cause Holsinger to misdiagnose the movement's more recent medievalist rhetoric. He does so despite his decision to outline the cold war international relations theory of neomedievalism—which, in many ways, is a perfect demonstration of how a pre-enlightenment worldview still sits at the heart of neoconservatism's contemporary foreign policy. Holsinger argues that neomedievalism “has its origins in the writings of the British political theorist Hedley Bull” (55). He cites Bull's thoughts on the changing dynamics of the cold war world order first shared in his 1977 book, *Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*:

It is ... conceivable that sovereign states might disappear and be replaced not by a world government but by a modern and secular equivalent of the kind of universal political organization that existed in Western Christendom in the Middle Ages. ...

All authority in medieval Christendom was thought to derive ultimately from God and the political system was basically theocratic. ... It is not fanciful to imagine that there might develop a modern and secular counterpart of it that embodies its central

characteristic: a system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalty. (qtd in Holsinger 56-57)

Bull's prediction of a possible turn away from the nation-state as the dominant method of world governance is perfectly aligned with neoconservatism's desires, as well as its arguments for the need of such a shift in governance. Holsinger's recognition that "neomedievalism (or 'The New Medievalism', as others have dubbed it) grew into an influential school of thought ... following the demise of the cold war in the early nineties" (58), shows that he is aware of this form of thought's prominence, which leads one to wonder why the use of medievalist rhetoric by post-9-11 neoconservatives shocks him so much, and seems, to him, to come out of nowhere.

Holsinger's reasoning appears a bit more visibly near the end of his chapter on neomedievalism, as he says, "for me, the most compelling aspect of neoconservative neomedievalism is how it suggests that the neocons may finally be getting it—and not only getting it, but recruiting it, exploiting it, and using it to their own tactical advantage as they adapt their juridical and diplomatic languages to the post-9/11 world" (65). This argument, again, slightly misses the mark. While Holsinger is correct in his assessment of neoconservatism's newfound realization that it can exploit the language of medievalism to great success in the post-9-11 world, this does not entail that the movement's use of this language is purely tactical. As discussed, Holsinger's failure to assess conservatism's long-term self-alignment with medievalism leads him to overlook the grounding of these arguments, and to misdiagnose what is a decision, by neoconservatism, to reveal, or to make more overt, its medieval worldview, as, instead, the movement's sudden recognition of the tenets of neomedievalism as a helpful tactical tool through which to achieve its policy goals.

Now that some of the gaps within Holsinger's argument have been outlined, I will illustrate how, by centering the long-term alignment between American conservatism and medievalism, one might better understand contemporary political issues and features of the conservative movement. One such issue is not only the continued prevalence of racism in America, but also its ability to remake, and, often, to disguise itself. Part of reason that racism in America is often able to successfully obscure itself is due, once again, to the lack of recognition as to the medieval roots of these forms of racism.

In her book, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, Geraldine Heng offers a powerful history of racism in the Middle Ages—a concept that many medievalist scholars have often been openly hostile toward. Heng writes of the reception her initial work on this project faced, “in 2008, medievalists in general were not convinced the concept of race had any purchase for the medieval period. Race theorists also deemed the project presentist, convinced that race was a *modern* phenomenon and that they could safely ignore the Middle Ages, which they saw as a prepolitical era” (Heng 3). Heng's book, by pushing back against these claims, and demonstrating the highly political nature of the Middle Ages, as well as the prevalence of racism in said era, serves as a powerful tool for critiquing the racist aspects of contemporary neoconservatism in America. However, as discussed, in order to make this connection, one must be aware of the longstanding alignment the neoconservative movement has made between its own ideology and the medieval era.

Heng goes on to write of medieval racism, “‘Race’ is one of the primary names we have ... that is attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import, to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups” (3). She

ties this process directly to religious persecution in the Middle ages, saying that racists attempted to subject “peoples of a detested faith ... to a political theology that could biologize, define, and essentialize an entire community as fundamentally and absolutely different in an interknotted cluster of ways. Nature/biology and the sociocultural should not thus be seen as bifurcated spheres in medieval race formation” (Heng 3). By understanding the ways in which medieval racism operates, and, in the process, coming to see the malleability of racism, we might better understand the post-9/11 pathologization of certain nations and religions by neoconservatives as representing how this movement not only adopts the rhetoric of medievalism, but is also directly inspired by its dominant ideologies. Heng writes of the negative effects of the refusal, by many scholars, to name medieval racism for what it is, “the refusal of race destigmatizes the impacts and consequences of certain laws, acts, practices, and institutions in the medieval period, so that we cannot name them for what they are, and makes it impossible to bear adequate witness to the full meaning of the manifestations and phenomena they installed” (Heng 4). Thus, not only must one stay cognizant of neoconservatism’s self-alignment with medievalism, in order to better understand the post-9/11 political landscape, but, at the same time, a fuller interrogation of the medieval era, as outlined by Heng, remains necessary for a fuller understanding of both the past and the present.

In their book, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity*, Daniel Hosang and Joseph E. Lowndes describe the changing nature of racism in contemporary America—something that, I believe, can be more fully understood by looking to Heng’s outline of medieval racism, as well as neoconservatism’s alignment with a medieval-inspired worldview. Hosang and Lowndes write, “political and economic elites need novel new forms of moral legitimation to justify the withdrawal of their commitments to the growing

number of households newly vulnerable to an economy rooted in plunder and financial predation” (Hosang and Lowndes 5). They continue by calling for a fuller understanding of race as not only a social construct, but also a political construct needed in any society that is “structured in dominance” (10), where it serves as “a shared basis of comprehending and reproducing distinctions of merit and stigma, autonomy and despondency, and authority and dispossession” (10). Given the increased precarity and dispossession within America’s contemporary economy, Hosang and Lowndes believe that racism has been extended in new ways, in order to attempt to justify and naturalize these happenings. Thus, by looking to Heng’s broadened definition of racism, and her demonstration of the existence of medieval racism, one might better understand these new racialized tactics, on the part of neoconservatives, as another example of the effects of their self-alignment with medievalism.

Hosang and Lowndes go on to argue that, “even when these claims are used to stigmatize groups of largely white workers, race still performs important political labor, as the hierarchical taxonomies of capitalism continue to be constituted through racialized distinctions and meanings” (10)—a process that they believe can be understood through the term racial transposition, or the ways in which, “meaning, valence, and signification of race can be transferred from one context, group, or setting to another” (12). Hosang and Lowndes’ argument is very well-aligned with Heng’s description of medieval racism, and this fact helps to illustrate how it is the desire for a maintenance of hierarchy, and the belief that pre-enlightenment ideals can be used to successfully maintain said hierarchy, that sits at the heart of neoconservatism’s ideology. This ideology manifests itself in both the use crusade-like language abroad, as well as new forms of racial transposition at home, in an effort to, as stated by Heng above, “demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized ... to

distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups.” Thus, contrary to Holsinger’s claims, it is quite evident that neoconservatism’s understanding of medievalism (even if this understanding, as Holsinger claims, is mistaken) should be seen as central to the movement’s politics, rather than as a strategic use of rhetoric.

The effects of conservatism’s medievalism are also visible in other areas of contemporary politics. In his book, *Medieval Imagery in Today’s Politics*, Daniel Wollenberg describes the rise of white nationalism in the 2010s, saying, “At the core of that ethnic nationalism is the association of modernity with liberalism, tolerance, individualism, and multiculturalism; and of the premodern—the medieval—with solidarity, stability, law and order, cultural advance, and security” (Wollenberg 2). This description seems to identify some of the core values of neoconservatism as well—something especially visible in similar claims for the Iraq war as promoting “stability, law and order, cultural advance,” etc.

Wollenberg goes on to argue that the rise of ethnic nationalism “at times draws on the medieval past, whether to paint enemies as primitive savages (which Trump himself often does) or to give weight to claims for the longevity and legitimacy of a unified white culture that has been battling for its survival for centuries (as his former chief strategist Steve Bannon has done)” (Wollenberg 2). As discussed throughout this paper, these attempts at drawing upon medievalism, in order to justify subjugation and hierarchy, are nothing new when it comes to the conservative movement. Rather, what is, in fact, novel about these new forms of racist nationalism is the way in which they have, once more, made this self-alignment with medievalism extremely overt. This process of making more visible contemporary American conservatism’s medieval roots began in the wake of 9-11, and, as can be seen in these more recent examples, has expanded since then to envelop not only international conflicts, in the form

of crusade-like language, but also domestic policies in America and parts of Western Europe. Wollenberg also supports Heng's central arguments for medieval racism by claiming that "Medieval European society is seen by some on the far and extreme right today as racialist, in that it acknowledged, embraced, and celebrated its population as a dominant white Christian race. The contemporary fight to proclaim a distinct white European identity is perceived to be an extension and continuation of the medieval order" (27). Wollenberg should also note that this contemporary fight for a return to medievalism, and the racialization it is seen as upholding, is part of a long-standing tradition within conservatism, as has been highlighted throughout this paper.

While, thus far, I have focused mostly upon American conservatism, it is important to note that similar self-alliances between conservatism and medievalism can also be seen in very recent events in Europe. One excellent example is within the Brexit campaign. In his essay, *Medievalism, Brexit, and the Myth of Nations*, Andrew B.R. Elliott writes:

In the aftermath of the UK's referendum in June 2016, which resulted in a vote to leave the European Union commonly referred to by the portmanteau "Brexit," ... medievalist rhetoric finds itself once again entrenched in political discourse. ... The use of medieval history in the support of individual nationalistic projects is neither new nor original, but often exerts a powerful pull on the ways in which a nation comes to be reimagined, particularly in periods of crisis and upheaval. (32)

Elliott's argument parallels Holsinger's discussion on the rise of medievalist rhetoric in the wake of 9/11; however, Elliott is less surprised than Holsinger by the sudden manifestation of these references, as he notes the fact that this is "neither new nor original ... in periods of crisis and upheaval." While Elliott is correct to note the uptick in the number of open references

conservatism makes to medievalism during periods of crisis, it is important to recognize that this fact does not mean this self-alignment with medievalism is any less strong during other time periods.

Elliott has written elsewhere on some of the other manifestations of medieval rhetoric within contemporary conservatism. One such example is his article, “Internet Medievalism and the White Middle Ages.” In this piece, Elliott describes the rise of the alt-right in America, as well as far-right movements in Britain and Australia, while highlighting their shared use of medievalist rhetoric. He writes,

Consequently, following their development from 18th-century theories of race to Nazi appropriations of the medieval, to the uses of Crusade rhetoric by the Bush Administration and up to their reuse in the United Kingdom's Brexit negotiations, it seems that from then to now, very little has changed in the misappropriation of the medieval past, particularly by the Far Right. (5)

Elliott’s claims for a long tradition of the right-wing misappropriation of the medieval aligns quite well with the central argument of this paper. Near the end of his article, he goes on to say that,

seen most recently in the rise of Far Right political parties in Europe and the Alt-Right's violence at Charlottesville, Virginia, the security of online in-groups can move from purportedly celebratory patriotism to terrorism, with fatal results. In short, however banal their medievalisms might be in their online discourse, the (ab)use of the medieval past has serious effects which can and do matter in the real world. (Elliott 8)

As discussed, while one may question the historical accuracy of these many contemporary invocations of medievalism by conservatism (as Holsinger does), the act of centering the long-

standing self-alignment between conservatism and medievalism helps to reveal the fact that these invocations are, nevertheless, founded upon a very real ideology—one that, as Elliott concludes, poses a major threat to its many supposed enemies.

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