



Savvas, T., & Coffman, C. (Eds.) (2019). Introduction: American Fiction after Postmodernism. *Textual Practice*, 33(2), 195-212.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1505322>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1080/0950236X.2018.1505322](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1505322)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Taylor and Francis at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1505322?scroll=top&needAccess=true>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

## Introduction: American Fiction after Postmodernism

Theo Savvas & Christopher K. Coffman

In a number of essays published between 1988 and 1993, David Foster Wallace presented a vision of contemporary American fiction that broke in some important regards from then-typical definitions of postmodernist writing. The most influential articulations of his various claims are those of ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,’ which appeared in a 1993 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* and later in his 1997 collection, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*. In this piece, Foster Wallace argues for what he variously labels ‘hyperrealism,’ ‘fiction of the image,’ and ‘post-postmodernism,’ a rejection of ironic modes and attitudes, which he sees as characteristic of postmodernist literature, and for a shift in the direction of a ‘single-entendre’ fiction, one that finds authenticity by supplanting or supplementing the generally unproductive impulses of critique with those of constructive moral engagement and the recovery of language’s referential function. While a number of reviewers, critics, and essayists commented on post-postmodernist tendencies in the decades following Foster Wallace’s publication of these arguments, it took several years for them to gain traction, and critics only settled on something like a descriptor for them upon publication, in 2010, of Adam Kelly’s ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction.’<sup>1</sup>

Although Foster Wallace’s statements are perhaps the most well-known of this sort, he is hardly the only figure to have registered that American authors of the early 1990s were producing a new sort of fiction, or to have attempted to elucidate the terms on which that fiction was unfolding. In the succeeding decades, an array of writers and critics have increasingly recognized that something different from the sort of high-postmodernism of figures like John Barth, Robert

Coover, and Thomas Pynchon may be found in many of the most interesting and aesthetically successful of recent fictions. Furthermore, many have attempted to describe the nature of this shift, or at least to clarify the terms of the debate inspired by it. In most instances, these efforts conclude that contemporary fiction offers a development of or refocusing on certain neglected aspects of postmodernist literature, but not a radical break with it. Works such as Jeremy Green's 2005 *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* and Jeffrey T. Nealon's 2012 *Post-Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, for example, regard 'late postmodernist' or 'post-postmodernist' fictions as evidence of the intensification of the impact of late capitalist economies and electronic mediation on cultural production. Others, such as the authors of the essays in Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Clare La Berge's 2012 *Reading Capitalist Realism* and James Wood (albeit less flatteringly) in his 2000 review 'Human, all too Inhuman,' suggest that fiction is, provoked by some of those same factors, undergoing a reactionary return to Realist aesthetics. On the other hand, some critics argue for a more radical break between the postmodern and post-postmodern, as does Alan Kirby in his 2009 *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture*. In spite of some disagreement among critics regarding the nature and degree of difference between the postmodern and the post-postmodern, there is a general acceptance of the idea that claims like Foster Wallace's are on the mark: contemporary American fiction has, since roughly 1989, increasingly valorized such seemingly naïve literary qualities as a return to mimetic verisimilitude, a display of historical awareness, and a preoccupation with the physical nature of the textual artifact as keys to the revitalization of a constructive textual authenticity, one that reinvigorates the exchange between reader and literary text.

While the dates of the aforementioned pieces begin only in 2005, they in fact follow signs posted throughout the 1990s and early 2000s that indicate a more extensive history of thinking about the subject. Notable instances of earlier engagements include the papers of Heide Ziegler's 1991 symposium 'The End of Postmodernism,' Mark Amerika and Lance Olsen's arguments in *In Memoriam to Postmodernism* (1995) that an 'Avant-Pop' aesthetic has replaced the postmodernist one, Stephen Burn's 2000 essay 'The End of Postmodernism: American Fiction of the Millennium,' Raymond Federman's 2001 claim that postmodernism died in 1989, with the death of Samuel Beckett (and, perhaps, the fall of the Berlin Wall), and Robert McLaughlin's 2004 article 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World.' In spite of the at least temporary dominance of Foster Wallace's perspective, and the relatively lengthy timeline of efforts to ascertain the nature of a post-postmodern turn, there remains considerable disagreement among critics regarding a number of factors germane to the categorization and description of such recent developments in fiction. Furthermore, the terms 'Avant-Pop,' 'post-postmodernist,' 'late-postmodernist,' 'digimodernist,' and 'New Sincerity' are themselves maligned in certain quarters as insufficient. One intervention was attempted by a number of cultural theorists who proposed 'metamodernism' as a term sufficient to both the shift in literary practice and all of the several qualities and concerns that other efforts to describe that shift have identified. The best statement of this position so far is Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen's 2017 collection *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*. While it is possible that 'metamodernism' may win the day as a label for the best next thing after postmodernism, questions regarding the post-postmodern turn's nature and implications are hardly resolved. Indeed, the catalogues of the preceding paragraphs indicate the remarkable degree to which the critical debate surrounding the post-postmodern is ongoing,

rich, and problematic. As Linda Hutcheon suggests in the epilogue to her 2002 *The Politics of Postmodernism*, the lack of clarity is a problem of some concern, for the inability to establish the terminology and general thrust of critical projects relating to contemporary literary efforts hinders not only the critical enterprise, but also, and more importantly, the dissemination of critical insights to a wider audience. The articles collected in this issue of *Textual Practice* began with a recognition that arguments about what follows postmodernism have settled into a handful of fairly stable positions, and that some stock-taking is thus overdue.<sup>2</sup> They each touch upon one or more familiar figures, positions, and approaches, but collectively augment and assess the implications of the ongoing conversation about post-postmodernist American literature as revealed in some of its definitive texts. In the pages that follow, we offer a brief overview of these positions and their contexts.

## I. Recovery of the Real

Philip Roth's essay 'Writing American Fiction,' from 1961, is concerned, as one of the contributors to this issue notes, with how "the serious writer" has failed to find an appropriate strategy or form for dealing with the reality of the social and historical world.' One might suggest that US writing went on to offer two possible solutions to the problem that Roth diagnosed. One way produced 'New Journalism' and the 'Non-Fiction Novel.' The writers of these related forms – including most prominently Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote – utilised the techniques of fiction in an attempt to achieve a greater degree of verisimilitude in, and so authority for, their work. For Wolfe, such literature 'enjoys an advantage so obvious, so built in, one almost forgets what a power it has [...] the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually

happened. The disclaimers are erased. The screen is gone. The writer is one step closer to the absolute involvement of the reader that Henry James and James Joyce dreamed of and never achieved.<sup>3</sup> Here was a form which would, in the words of Capote, 'remove disguises,' from the representation of the 'social and historical world,' and let the facts apparently speak for themselves. Postmodernist writers took the opposite stance.<sup>4</sup> As Barth commented, 'A different way to come to terms with the discrepancy between art and the Real Thing is to affirm the artificial element in art (you can't get rid of it anyhow) and make the artifice part of your point.'<sup>5</sup> This, of course, is the credo of the metafictionists, and it begins from the premise outlined by Ronald Sukenick that 'reality is, simply, our experience and objectivity is, of course, an illusion.'<sup>6</sup>

Coover's 'The Babysitter' troubled the distinction between 'objective' reality and experience, by refusing to distinguish ontologically between what happens, what might possibly happen and what characters want to happen.<sup>7</sup> Coover establishes a narrative world in which generic conventions and television seem to generate and govern the characters' behaviour. Undercutting the distinction between artifice, fantasy, and reality means that everything we read in the story must be regarded as 'both true and false, as both happening and not happening,' in the words of Ronald Christ.<sup>8</sup> The 'illusion' of objectivity also governed the work of E. L. Doctorow in the 1970s and 1980s and led him to renounce what he called the 'chaste or objective voice of realism.'<sup>9</sup> The point is made, metafictionally, by the narrator of his 1971 novel *The Book of Daniel*, who notes, while discussing the film version of *The Spy who Came In from the Cold*, that 'life is never this well plotted but the picture is meant to be appreciated for its realism [...] Burton walks around like a man with a realistic load of shit in his pants.'<sup>10</sup> Doctorow would go

on to suggest in his important essay ‘False Documents,’ that ‘there is no fiction or non-fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative,’ a point exemplified in his next novel, *Ragtime* (1975), in which historical personages – Harry Houdini, Sigmund Freud, Stanford White – mingle with characters from Doctorow’s imagination.<sup>11</sup> Where New Journalism brought the techniques of fiction to the documenting of the ‘real,’ Doctorow’s technique was to bring the ‘real’ into his novels, and then, through metafictional devices, challenge the ways in which we construct our notion of the ‘real.’ It was through such metafictional admissions that narrative might, in a sense, be redeemed: ‘It is a world born for liars,’ he commented, ‘and we [fiction writers] are born liars. But we are to be trusted because is the only profession forced to admit that it lies – and the bestows upon us the mantle of honesty.’<sup>12</sup>

Through the 1980s there was also, however, a strand of American writing that was avoiding such admissions and working a towards a ‘revitalization of realism,’ in the words of Robert Rebein.<sup>13</sup> Key here was Raymond Carver who best demonstrated ‘how to be a serious artist without taking art as his subject matter.’<sup>14</sup> The year before Rebein adumbrated his argument in his book *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists* (2001), the critic Wood, writing in the *New Republic*, had coined the pejorative term ‘Hysterical Realism’ to describe both the recent work of first-generation postmodernists such as Pynchon and Don DeLillo, and the work of a new breed of writers, like Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith.<sup>15</sup> The phrasing of Wood’s chief charge, that such fiction ‘knows a thousand things but does not know a single human being,’ seemed a deliberate rebuke to Foster Wallace, who had frequently asserted that fiction is about ‘what it is to be a fucking human being.’<sup>16</sup> Whatever value Wood’s charge has – and it does have some – it has not stopped

Foster Wallace's writing from being seen as the standard-bearer of an emergent 'New Sincerity' in American writing. This writing, which includes the work of Rick Moody, Jennifer Egan, George Saunders, and the later Jonathan Franzen, is generally seen as an attempt to move beyond the irony of postmodernist fiction, and to counter the 'waning of affect' that such fiction effected (at least to the mind of Fredric Jameson).<sup>17</sup> Foster Wallace's short story 'Octet,' from *Brief Interview with Hideous Men* (1999), has been labelled the 'Ur-text of New Sincerity.'<sup>18</sup> 'Octet' is presented as a story – or really a failed story – concerned with achieving empathy and community with its readers; but the extreme metafictionality of the text, the postmodern narratological modes employed, and the liberal extended footnotes which take over the ostensible main text, function to demonstrate just how difficult it is to escape the regime of irony that postmodernism installed. To put it another way, 'Octet' demonstrates the difficulty not so much of being sincere – but of convincing others of one's sincerity. As Smith has suggested, the author seems to be demanding a leap of faith, and whether one can make the leap will likely 'make or break you as a reader of Foster Wallace.'<sup>19</sup> And the story ends by putting its fate in the hands of the reader: 'So decide,' it concludes.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, while Smith herself had seemingly accepted, in 2000, some of Wood's charges, by 2008 she had become critical of the kind of fiction that he was advocating. Such 'lyrical realism' – Smith points to Joseph O'Neil's *Netherland* (2008), as one example – had made no attempt to grapple with the legacies of modernism or postmodernism and 'blithely continues on its merry road, with not a metaphysical care in the world.'<sup>21</sup> Where Smith saw such realism as shirking metaphysical duties, Theophilus Savvas in his piece in this issue suggests that it may also be unsuitable for grappling with some of the environmental exigencies of our time. In Savvas's



reading the posthuman framing of Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* (2007) offers a more successful engagement with ecological issues than does the humanistic focus on the individual liberal subject found in Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* (2015). For Lee Konstantinou such 'storytelling realism' – Konstantinou points to the work of Clare Messud and Jeffrey Eugenides, as well as Franzen – is to be distinguished from the work of those he dubs 'affective neorealists,' writers who seek to 'jump the gap between the sign and the referent, turning to forms such as the essay, photography, and other archival practices that license a fantasy that one might escape linguistic and conceptual mediation and thereby gain access to the real itself'; chief among these writers are Sheila Heti, Ben Marcus, Ben Lerner, and Teju Cole.<sup>22</sup> The significance of the fact that critics are beginning the task of delineating trends within neorealism is that it comes with the tacit acceptance that the realist turn must now be taken for granted.

## II. Recovery of the Historical

Jameson begins his seminal *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, with the assertion that the postmodern is 'an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically.'<sup>23</sup> In so doing, he both distinguishes postmodernism from modernism and makes central to the distinction the problem of contemporary historical awareness. For Jameson, the cultural environment that is postmodernism has exchanged an interest in the referent represented for an interest in the representation itself. As a result, he contends, 'producers of culture' have available a 'museum' of 'dead styles' that can be imitated, but those imitations will at best achieve only a sort of pastiche that lacks true historical grounding.<sup>24</sup> Seen from Jameson's vantage, even quite historically engaged postmodernist

fictions, such as Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) can provide 'pseudohistorical depth,' but are otherwise limited in their possibilities to explore contemporary concerns in the context of authentic historical awareness.<sup>25</sup>

While Jameson's remarks have been remarkably influential, others find in them something of a blind spot to the achievements of postmodernist fictions. For Linda Hutcheon, to assert a deficiency of historical sensibility is a misdiagnosis. Hutcheon claims that postmodernism has, in fact, fostered many examples of 'historiographic metafiction,' fictions that are 'intensely self-reflexive [...] yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages.'<sup>26</sup> Such texts, she argues, unite literary practice, historical interest, and the insights of critical theory in such a manner that they display 'theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs,' with the consequence that fiction can be a tool for parodic 'rethinking and reworking [...] the forms and contents of the past.'<sup>27</sup> So, while Jean-François Lyotard's proposal that postmodernity displays an 'incredulity toward metanarratives' is, from the perspective of a thinker like Jameson, a hobbling, or even an entire undermining, of the historical import of fiction, Hutcheon reclaims it as the basis for cultural critique.<sup>28</sup> On this view, Barth's commentary on myths of American independence in *LETTERS* (1979), DeLillo's foregrounding of the uncertainty surrounding John F. Kennedy's assassination in *Libra* (1988), or Coover's fanciful mix of Richard Nixon and the Depression-era United States in *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* (1987) can be read as political critiques whose power derives exactly from their engagement with the contradictions, elisions, and other aporia of historical narration.

While Hutcheon's argument makes space for considering the historico-political import of postmodernist cultural productions, American fiction of the long 1990s (from the Cold-War-close-signaling fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001) increasingly exhibited characteristics incompatible with her definition of historiographic metafiction, while it also avoided regressing to the historical vacuity Jameson asserted. Indeed, fictions of the decade continued to display a concern with the historical past and a metafictional reflexivity, as evident in works like Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* (1993), Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997), Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997). Yet, these and other American novels of the decade displayed a shift with regard to the import of historical consciousness, mixing critiques of the historical past such as those Hutcheon describes with explorations of the possible terms of contemporary community informed by an understanding of that past. Critics soon registered this change in emphasis: in his *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s*, for instance, Samuel Cohen describes the decade's novels as turning away from 'difference, division, and exclusion' and toward something more productive.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Phillip E. Wegner's *Life between Two Deaths, 1989–2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* claims many younger authors of fiction and cultural theorists have exchanged an interest in agonistic critique for more productive considerations of 'alternative forms of collective being.'<sup>30</sup> Examples of this tendency can be found, as Michael Walonen argues, in the work of figures such as Colson Whitehead, whose early fictions (notably *John Henry Days*, published in 2001, on the cusp of the post-9/11 world) engage the American past not only as a critique of the 'mythic doxa of history,' but 'as a means of conceptualizing historical and political possibilities for their era.'<sup>31</sup>

After 2001, these grappings with the past are intensified, and in many cases fictions find a way forward, out of postmodernist detachment and toward constructive possibility, via the history most germane to literary texts: literary history itself. In these instances, literary forms are viewed not as mere conventions available for presentation on the terms of pastiche, as Jameson would have it, but as a means to enact affectively powerful and authentic considerations of the present in relation to the reality of the past. One strong example of the effort is William T. Vollmann's *Seven Dreams* series, each volume of which reminds readers that his attempt is not traditional historiography, but a 'Symbolic History,' 'an account of origins and metamorphoses which is often untrue based on the literal facts as we know them, but whose untruths further a deeper sense of truth.'<sup>32</sup> Although the correspondences between the stylistic and generic elements of Vollmann's works and those of his sources—*Argall* (2001) is written in seventeenth-century English, *Fathers and Crows* (1992) employs structural elements of the *Jesuit Relations*, and so forth—may be seen in some senses as akin to the more superficial treatment of such features in postmodernist texts like Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), these components are mingled in Vollmann's novels with autobiographical passages about the research and composition the author undertook in creating the novels. In this manner, the past of the historical novel is brought into relations with the present reality of the field and library research undertaken by the author, establishing a clear connection between his present experience and the past preserved in the archive of texts that shape his own. Similar tactics to this establishment of a connection between the work of the author in the present and the historical material he or she treats are evident in several other notable fictions of the past fifteen years, including Dave Eggers's *What is the What* (2006), which blends biographical information about Valentino Achak Deng with

historiographical treatment of Sudanese refugees in the United States, and Michael Chabon's *Moonglow* (2016), which narrates the history of Chabon's own family.

In this issue, Alexander Moran and Christopher K. Coffman examine another way in which literary traditions—especially those codified in generic forms—can open texts toward authentic engagement with the past. Coffman claims that Vollmann finds in literary-historical continuities with the gothic tradition a means to access the unarticulated reality of the broader historical past. In Vollmann's works, Coffman argues, this connection to the past via literary tradition becomes a means to revive historical consciousness and generate community in the present by honoring the ruptures of hemispheric history. Moran posits a wider post-postmodern phenomenon that he terms 'genrefication,' considering how authors such as Whitehead and Jennifer Egan historicize the present by recognizing the affective potential contained within generic forms. Although the processes Coffman and Moran describe operate in somewhat different ways, both articles claim a recognition on the part of contemporary authors that literary conventions strengthen fiction's ability to revive historical consciousness in the present. Their arguments could be seen as applying as well to a number of other recent texts that draw extensively on genre fiction and canonical texts of the literary tradition, including Mat Johnson's *Pym*, Bennett Sims's *A Questionable Shape* (2011), Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), among others.

Whether through engagement with earlier literary forms or the delineation of connections between the writing of fiction in the present and the conditions of the historical past, post-postmodern authors have displayed an ongoing interest in—and increasingly achieved a renewal

of—historical awareness. In so doing, they have expanded the scope of the contemporary inclination to the recovery of the real, an inclination spurred in part by dissatisfaction with the ironic, postmodern rejection of the possibility of the authentic. To the extent that they have so far succeeded, contemporary authors engaging the deep truth of the past enable readers to recognize the historical conditions of our moment, and to consider terms for community today.

### III. Material Concerns

Genealogies of postmodernist fiction often mention *Tristram Shandy* (1759) as a precursor, and the formal playfulness, presentation of language as constitutive of reality, and generic instability of Laurence Sterne's novel certainly presage similar features in many notable postmodernist texts.<sup>33</sup> Among the other justifications of claims for Sterne's precession are his use of extravagant graphic materials, such as the diagrams of plot structures and marbled and black pages. These visual features, taken alongside the surrounding text, productively bridge the worlds of print narrative and of image and draw attention to the materiality of the book held by the reader in a reflexive fashion. In this regard, Sterne's novel anticipates not only many instances of radically experimental twentieth-century fiction, but also features encountered in more mainstream postmodernist texts, such as the Möbius strip at the start of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), the images and unconventional typography and layout of William Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (1968), the genre-challenging blend of autobiography and fiction in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972), and the assault on the regime of linear print narrative represented by William Burroughs's cut-up trilogy (1961–1964). Additional earlier or contemporary points could be mapped onto this consideration of the

heritage of postmodernist manipulations of texts' traditional formal, material, and generic qualities (from illuminated manuscripts and William Blake's prints to children's picture books and the text montages of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* [1930–1936]), but such efforts would finally need to accommodate the fact that many earlier experiments with image, typography, layout, and narrative form can seem from the current vantage like only more-or-less prescient ancestors of the interactive and accelerated surround of our hypermediated present.<sup>34</sup>

The ubiquity and effects of digital media initially registered in contemporary American fiction in two ways. One was the consolidation of cyberpunk, a branch of speculative fiction concerned with the social impact of digital technologies in the information age. Not surprisingly, the genre is highly self-aware: the conventions established by William Gibson's foundational *Neuromancer* (1984) were already being subjected to parodic critique by other cyberpunk fictions within a decade, notably in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992). Nevertheless, cyberpunk became an important element of some early assertions that postmodernism had run its course, perhaps most notably those of Avant-Pop. Just as cyberpunk blended the popular genre of science fiction with unconventional narrative elements as a means to think better about emergent digital technologies, so Avant-Pop ignored the popular / high culture divide with an interest in finding a middle ground between mindless consumption of pop culture and ironic subversion of the same. Also like cyberpunk, Avant-Pop was intensely aware of the role of electronic and mass media: Larry McCaffery mentions not only literary texts as examples, but also films, music (the term 'Avant Pop' was taken from a Lester Bowie LP, and rock bands like Stereolab and Sonic Youth get nods), and such television shows as *Max Headroom* and *Twin Peaks*.<sup>35</sup> McCaffery, Mark Amerika, Lance Olsen, Sukenick, and others went on to produce both

the theoretical underpinnings and key texts of Avant-Pop. Importantly, the conversation went online early, at the Alt-X website (1993, home of the earliest publications of the *electronic book review*), while acknowledging as well the ongoing relevance of print texts, first in the *Avant-Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation* collection published in 1992 by the Fiction Collective Two's imprint Black Ice Books, and then *After Yesterday's Crash: The Avant-Pop Anthology*, issued by Viking's more mainstream Penguin Books in 1995. Intriguingly, Avant-Pop remained entangled with its declared predecessor: the aforementioned anthologies included pieces by postmodernist stalwarts like DeLillo and Coover alongside those of younger authors such as Marcus, Foster Wallace, and Vollmann. Likewise, while Amerika declares in his 'Avant-Pop Manifesto' that 'Postmodernism is dead and we're in the process of finally burying it,' he adds, from its remains Avant-Pop is now born.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, while cyberpunk, Avant-Pop, and other media-aware fiction of the 1980s and 1990s generally recognized some divergence from early postmodernist writing, they sometimes stumbled in articulating sharp distinctions between the old order and the new—a difficult problem similar to that addressed in each of the articles in this special issue.

The second broad category of notable early engagements with digital technologies by authors of American fiction was driven by an interest in the possibilities new media presented for the composition of narratives. American fiction awoke to opportunities allowed by hypertext upon the release of Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* (1987), but, as Astrid Ensslin has argued, the 1990s saw the development of digital technologies that motivated more advanced hyperfictional practice.<sup>37</sup> The work of Joyce and his contemporaries in the late 1980s and very early 1990s took shape in the context of now-archaic platforms for networked communications and the transfer



protocols of pre-HTTP web browsing. These early digital fictions were interactive, but, as Ensslin explains, ‘use images sparsely and mainly as illustrative or decorative means.’<sup>38</sup> The situation changed somewhat after the mid-1990s, when Internet use became much more widespread due to the ease of access allowed by user-friendly graphic browsers for the World Wide Web (beginning with Mosaic, in 1993) and the development of the commercial Internet (after 1995). Related technological innovations have produced readers of fiction who expect more complexly and seamlessly integrated hypermediated texts (such as Olsen and Tim Guthrie’s 2005 novel, *10:01*), ones that offer fictions in which the visual, auditory, and other multi-media features do not merely supplement the written text, but operate alongside it to compose a whole that is ‘more than the sum of its constituent parts.’<sup>39</sup> In short, the many possibilities of digital fictions (aka hypermedia, or cybertexts) have been explored over the past three decades, but their material nature, rather than some engagement with any other perceived insufficiencies of postmodernist print fiction, is the primary marker of their distinction from their predecessors.

Where that distinction has more sharply emerged is in print texts produced during roughly the same period. One can approach the nature of the shift by first observing that many postmodernist fictions include images, blend genres, and deploy typographical extravagances as a means of defamiliarization, as Paula Geyh has explained with reference to Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions* (1973).<sup>40</sup> On this view, any material that troubles the process of reading type left-to-right-and-top-to-bottom both renews the reader’s experience of the text and reflexively reminds readers that written fiction is typically conceived as a narrative construct embodied in a codex. As a consequence of the latter point, postmodernist metafiction lends itself well to efforts to remind readers of print that they are dealing with a representation of experience embodied in a

material form that can serve the ends of unjust authority and control. Hence, a text like Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), which uses collage of text and image as a means to compose an African American historical counternarrative.

But, for writers since the mid-1990s, the world is already one of digital collage, of electronic textuality that is multimodal, ever-present, and nonlinear. Consequently, texts from the later 1990s, and increasingly since, explore the implications of our new media environment, as implied by the arguments of Kirby's *Digimodernism*. In some cases (like Eggers's *The Circle* [2013] and Franzen's *Purity*), this consideration is one of subject matter. In many others, the engagement with digital media instead, or also, evinces what Peter Boxall describes as 'the strikingly new attention to [...] materiality' in twenty-first century fiction.<sup>41</sup> Aspects of books like the many visual innovations in the novels of Danielewski, the PowerPoint chapter of Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011), the cut-up pages of *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer (2010), the extensive paratexts (glossaries, maps, sketches, timelines, notes, and so forth) of Vollmann's *Seven Dreams*, and the footnotes of Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), stand between traditional print fiction and the realm of digital media, recognizing that hypertext and other digital multimedia phenomena are not necessarily hindrances to the representational work of fiction, but something that models and can be incorporated as a means to enact more faithfully that representational work. There is something of anxiety in this impulse, in the sense that one wonders about the demesne of fiction in the new media environment, but a more positive spin, such as that advanced in Daniel Punday's *Writing at the Limit: The Novel in the New Media Ecology*, might be that other media than traditional print offer a 'way of talking about what it means to write and read a print novel'.<sup>42</sup> As the fictions mentioned earlier in this paragraph

demonstrate, recent authors grapple in their print fictions with the semiotic power of image and unconventional manipulations of layout and typography, the significance and necessity of which has been sharpened by the rise of digital mediations. In this issue, articles by Ralph Clare and Alison Gibbons demonstrate how the various paratextual materials and typographical experiments of two exemplary recent fictions, J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* (2013) and Olsen's *Theories of Forgetting* (2014), work in a centripetal fashion, encouraging the reader to move beyond the primary narrative, indeed (and contra the intertextuality characteristic of postmodernism) beyond the books, and into cognizance of the ecological and social worlds that lie outside their covers. Although this use of multimodal fiction does turn the reader to the world outside of the virtual, it resists simply condemning the virtual. Instead, these fictions enact a sensitive appraisal of the imbrication of hyper-media and non-digital experience that characterizes our digitally mediated world, without abandoning their place in the realm of print fiction.

#### IV. The Worlding of American Literature

Mukherjee, concluded her Gayley Lecture, delivered at the University of California, Berkeley in April 2011, by commenting that 'the academy has not yet developed the grid and the grammar to explore American works that are not quite "American" in a canonical sense.'<sup>43</sup> Though Mukherjee does not mention postmodernism, many of the writers and critics who have expressed a similar sensibility in the last decade or so suggest that the term has little descriptive value when it comes to the most interesting and exciting of new fiction. There are two ways in which we might conceptualise what is variously called the 'transnational' or 'planetary' turn in American

writing. The first is to think about the centripetal forces at play: that is, immigrant writing that is ‘changing the contours of a national literature,’ as Mukherjee put it in the title of her lecture.<sup>44</sup>

The second element results in part from the first: that is, the increased centrifugal force of an American studies that seeks to look beyond the American centre (or perhaps, more accurately, to resist the notion that America is the centre), and to develop strategies for recognising the world *in the local*.

Thinking about this in the context of this special issue, we might begin with the year 1973. Brian McHale and Len Platt, in their introduction to the *Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*, suggest that the publication of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* in 1973, following as it did the use of ‘postmodernism’ in critical works by Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, and William Spanos (in 1970, 1971, and 1972, respectively) marks 1973 as the point that postmodernism was ‘branded.’<sup>45</sup> In also stressing the significance of a number of world historical events of the year, such as the Arab Oil embargo and the Yom Kippur war, McHale and Platt draw on David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* which posits 1973 as the year in which the move to the globalized economy is inaugurated. For Harvey, Nixon’s decision in 1971 to move away from the gold standard and towards a system of fluctuating exchange rates prepares the ground for the decline of the ‘Fordist Regime’ – which he dates to 1973 – since by then money was effectively ‘de-materialised’, as a fully floating system of currency conversion was adopted. With no mechanism to regulate the growth rate of the country’s money supply, the US was increasingly drawn into the marketplace of global exchange – a condition which was given greater impetus in the 1980s by the free-market philosophies of President Ronald Reagan, and in the 1990s, by the growth in information technology.<sup>46</sup>

At precisely the same time that the US was entering into a new relationship with the world (at least in Harvey's reading), so too was American studies beginning to move away from the integrationist logic of its myth and symbol school. 1973 was the year that Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States was founded as a response to the dominance of white male American literature at the Modern Language Association conferences, and the continued circumscription of America, as nation, and idea.<sup>47</sup> American studies had been codified as a discipline in the cultural context of the Cold War – a culture of 'Containment,' and 'an age of conformity', in the words of Irving Howe, writing in the *Partisan Review* in 1954.<sup>48</sup> And the academic projections of American innocence found in the seminal texts of American studies – Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), R.W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), for instance – went hand-in-glove with Cold War questions of assimilability: Who is (an) American? Or what is an American? MELUS, in its mission status, sought to expand 'the definition of American literature through the study and teaching of Latino/a American, Native American, African American, Asian and Pacific American, and ethnically specific Euro-American literary works, their authors, and their cultural contexts.'<sup>49</sup>

Coincidentally, 1973 was also the year at which immigration levels to the US were at their lowest; from that point on they began steadily rising, such that by 1990 the journalist William A. Henry could point out, in a piece for *Time* magazine called 'Beyond the Melting Pot,' that 'someday soon, surely much sooner than most people who filled out their Census forms last week realize, white Americans will become a minority group. Long before that day arrives, the presumption that the "typical" U.S. citizen is someone who traces his or her descent in a direct

line to Europe will be part of the past.’<sup>50</sup> A year later Gish Jen seemed to exemplify the point that Henry was making in her novel *Typical American* (1991).<sup>51</sup> Here, a makeshift family is established by Ralph, a Chinese immigrant, in a narrative which both challenges and resists any notion of the typicality of the title. Jen’s text also seemed to set the mood for the nineties; as Alike Varvogli notes, ‘this subversion of the traditional story of immigrant success and acceptance of a new identity is to be found in several other key texts of the decade.’<sup>52</sup>

Such ‘subversion’ in texts of the 1990s – that interregnum between two deaths, as Wegner put it – was one reason why, by the 2000s, postmodernism seemed no longer to address the critical exigencies of the time. How had it ever been possible to claim that literature had been exhausted? Or that representationalism had come to an end? Even the politicization of postmodernism through poststructuralism seemed flaccid, as Christian Moraru, amongst others, has suggested.<sup>53</sup> These changes precipitated calls for US literature to be placed in the context of its continent (Rachel Adams), to be globally ‘remapped’ (Paul Giles), and to be seen through ‘deep time’ (Wai Chee Dimock).<sup>54</sup> It may also be the case, as has been often argued, that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 play a part in this globalizing narrative. Slavoj Žižek’s oft-cited suggestion that the attacks ought to compel the US to ‘risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival into the Real World’ was echoed by critics such as Richard Gray, who noted the inadequacy of those post-9/11 texts which simply attempted to ‘assimilate the unfamiliar to the familiar,’ and so domesticate the crisis.<sup>55</sup>

Such a need is also recognized in Moraru's suggestion that what we are seeing is a turn towards a 'Cosmodernism', which is 'replacing postmodernism's conceptual unit, the nation-state, with an ever more networked world.' For Moraru, cosmodern authors are 'increasingly uncomfortable with an approach that, on an important level, reinforces an older worldview that conceptualizes and thus furthers "others" and externalizes alterity *qua* "theme" and "form."'56 Moraru declares as 'cosmodern' writers such as Chang-rae Lee, Karen Tei Yamashita, and Jhumpa Lahiri, but significantly also includes less obvious writers, including DeLillo and Safran Foer. Moraru points to *Underworld* as marking a shift from DeLillo's earlier exemplary postmodernist fictions in its engagement with global realities. Giles has also noted that the *world* in the title signifies the novel's 'global reach,' which, by focusing on the 'worlding capacity' of the Internet – 'where everybody is everywhere at once,' as DeLillo has it – induces a sense of 'cosmic communitarianism.'57 Eggers, of a later generation to DeLillo, but whose earliest writing – most notably his debut, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) – displayed an obvious debt to postmodernist practice, might also be seen as a writer who has become more attendant to the pressing question of the global through works such as *What is the What* and *Zeitoun* (2009). Bran Nicol's contribution to this issue picks up on both the matter of the global and the 'typical' in an essay which focuses on Eggers's most recent work. For Nicol, the global is embedded in this writing by virtue of its construction of the US as a 'typical' nation in the globalised twenty-first century world.

A notable consequence of the globalising of American literature and American studies has been the proliferation of, and the greater space afforded to, writing by women. While postmodernist writers certainly wished to use their writing to unsettle the idea of a common national project –

which might be understood in terms of the integrationist logic of cold war America noted above – some scholars, such as Nancy Hartsock, remain unconvinced that postmodernism is (or was) a useful tool for feminist politics.<sup>58</sup> In the final article in this issue, Kasia Boddy notes the way in which postmodernism has tended to be seen as marked through male lineage, ‘Pynchon begetting DeLillo begetting David Foster Wallace,’ and a phallic tendency towards the ‘big book,’ frequently coded as the Great American Novel. Her overview of this brings to the fore the writing of A. M. Homes, and offers a radical corrective to this male-dominated narrative.

---

1. Adam Kelly, ‘David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,’ in David Hering (ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 131–46.

2. Since the special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* on a similar theme, a number of important new texts and arguments have emerged, and concerns that had seemed pressing then have receded from the critical debate, so that a fresh overview is necessary. Andrew Hoberek (ed.), *Twentieth Century Literature*, special issue: After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary Fiction, 53, no. 3 (Fall 2007).

3. Tom Wolfe, ‘The New Journalism,’ in Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson (eds.), *The New Journalism* (Basingstoke: Picador, 1996 [orig. 1973]) p. 49.

4. Truman Capote, *Music for Chameleons* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1993), p. xv.

5. John Barth, ‘John Barth: An Interview,’ *Contemporary Literature*, 6, no. 1 (Winter–Spring, 1965), p. 6.



- 
6. Ronald Sukenick, 'The Death of the Novel,' in *The Death of the Novel and Other Stories* (Tallahassee: Fiction Collective 2, 2003), p. 41.
  7. Robert Coover, 'The Babysitter', in *Pricksongs and Descants* (New York: Grove, 2000 [1969]), 206–39.
  8. Ronald Christ, 'Forking Narratives,' *Latin American Literary Review* 7, no. 14 (Spring, 1979), p. 57.
  9. E. L. Doctorow, 'False Documents' [1977], in Richard Trenner (ed.), *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations* (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1983), p. 24.
  10. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 318.
  11. Doctorow, 'False Documents', p. 26.
  12. Ibid.
  13. Robert Rebein, *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), p. 17
  14. Ibid., p. 29.
  15. James Wood, 'Human, All Too Inhuman,' *The New Republic*, July 24, 2000, available here: <https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman>.
  16. Larry McCaffery, 'A Conversation with David Foster Wallace', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993). Available here: <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/>.
  17. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 10.
  18. Iain Williams, '(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace's "Octet"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56, no. 3 (2015), p. 300.

- 
19. Zadie Smith, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace,' *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 290.
20. David Foster Wallace, 'Octet,' in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (London: Abacus, 2011), p. 136.
21. Smith, 'Two Directions for the Novel,' *Changing My Mind*, p. 72.
22. Lee Konstantinou, 'Neorealist Fiction,' in Rachel Greenwald Smith (ed.), *American Literature in Transition, 2000–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 111. David Shields' manifesto *Reality Hunger* – mentioned in passing in Konstantinou – documents just a desire for the real, providing a patchwork of quotations – which 'must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel (minus the novel)' – taken from artists and writers 'who are breaking larger and larger chunks of "reality" into their work.' David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 6, p. 3.
23. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. ix.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
26. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 5.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.
29. Samuel Cohen, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), p. 7.

---

30. Phillip E. Wegner, *Life between Two Deaths, 1989–2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 34.

31. Michael Walonen, “‘This Making of Truth is Violence Too, Out of Which Facts Are Formed’”: Colson Whitehead’s Secret History of Post-Reconstruction America in *John Henry Days*, *Literature & History* 23, no. 2 (2014): p. 68.

32. William T. Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 397. Vollmann includes this statement in each of the five volumes of the *Seven Dreams* so far published, of which *The Ice-Shirt* was the first.

33. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 223; John Barth, *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction, 1984–1994* (Boston: Little, 1995), p. 285; McCaffery, *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), p. xv.

34. Critics have applied various labels to texts that blend media, including ‘ergodic literature’ (Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext—Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* [Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997]) and ‘multimodal discourse’ (Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication* [Oxford University Press, 2001]). The latter is perhaps the current front-runner.

35. McCaffery, ‘The Avant-Pop Phenomenon,’ *ANQ* 5.4 (1992): p. 216.

36. Mark Amerika, ‘Avant-Pop Manifesto: Thread Baring Itself in Ten Quick Posts’, *Alt-X*, accessed June 6, 2018, <http://www.altx.com/manifestos/avant.pop.manifesto.html>.

37. Astrid Ensslin, ‘Electronic Fictions: Television, the Internet, and the Future of Digital Fiction’, in Paula E. Geyh (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 185–86.

---

38. Ibid., ‘Hypertextuality,’ in Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson, and Benjamin J. Robertson (eds.), *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 262.

39. Ibid.

40. Paula E. Geyh, “Between Word and Image: The Textual and the Visual in Postmodern American Fiction,” in Paula E. Geyh (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 168.

41. Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 10.

42. Daniel Punday, *Writing at the Limit: The Novel in the New Media Ecology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), p. 2.

43. Bharati Mukherjee, ‘Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature,’ *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (1 September 2011): pp. 680–696, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajr027>.

44. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, ‘The Ambivalent American: Asian American Literature on the Cusp,’ in Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Amy Ling (eds.), *Reading the Literatures of Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 18.

45. Brian McHale and Len Platt, ‘General Introduction,’ in Brian McHale and Len Platt (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 7. For McHale and Platt, 1973 is the year in which postmodernism enters its ‘major phase.’ But, as our analysis here suggests, it might be more accurate to think of it as the high point of postmodernism, and so also the year when its decline commences.

---

46. The summary of Harvey's work here draws on Paul Giles's in *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 13.

47. For the history of MELUS, see Katharine Newman, 'MELUS Invented: The Rest is History,' *MELUS* 16, no. 4 (1989–1990), pp. 99–113.

48. Irving Howe, 'The Age of Conformity,' *Partisan Review* 21 (January-February 1954), available here: [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/irving-howe-voice-still-heard-this-age-of-conformity](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/irving-howe-voice-still-heard-this-age-of-conformity).

49. See <http://www.melus.org/>.

50. William A. Henry, III. 'Beyond the Melting Pot,' *Time* 9 April 1990, p. 28.

51. Gish Jen, *Typical American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).

52. Alike Varvogli, 'Borders and Mixed-Race Fictions,' in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *American Literature in Transition: 1990–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 223.

53. Christian Moraru, 'Postmodernism, cosmodernism, planetarism,' in McHale and Platt (eds.), *Cambridge History*, p. 488.

54. Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Paul Giles, *Global Remapping*.

55. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 49; Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 30.

---

56. Moraru, 'Postmodernism, cosmodernism, planetarism,' pp. 488, 489. For a fuller discussion, see Moraru, *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

57. Paul Giles, 'Globalization,' in Stephen J. Burn (ed.), *American Literature in Transition: 1990–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 239; Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 808.

57. Nancy Hartsock, 'Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory,' *Cultural Critique*, no. 14, The Construction of Gender and Modes of Social Division II (Winter, 1989–90), pp. 15–33.