Rose, A. (2020). Asbestos populism in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest. *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* , *21*(3), 339-354. https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2020.1773658

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
10.1080/17533171.2020.1773658

Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research
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This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via
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Asbestos populism in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Arthur Rose

Department of English, University of Bristol, United Kingdom

arthur.rose@bristol.ac.uk, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0817-6898

Arthur Rose is a Vice-Chancellor's Fellow in English at the University of Bristol in the U.K. He is the author of *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee* (Bloomsbury, 2017), and the co-editor of *Theories of History* (Bloomsbury, 2018) and *Reading Breath in Literature* (Palgrave, 2019). He is currently working on a cultural history of asbestos.

Word Count: 8093 (all-inclusive)

Asbestos Populism in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

This essay considers the changing relationship between asbestos and populism, as both terms travel across different semantic contexts. It argues that this dynamic relationship can help to outline a populist ecology, through which resource actors such as asbestos play a more significant role than either populist leaders or their people anticipate. Drawing on David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* as a site for examining the implications of this asbestos-inflected populist ecology, the essay suggests new ways of linking the recent populism of Donald Trump to an older, more articulate populism, exemplified by Pierre Trudeau.

Keywords: *Infinite Jest*, asbestos, populism, Donald Trump, Pierre Trudeau

In 2012, the speculative fiction writer Neal Stephenson coined "Arsebestos" to describe a public health crisis related to sitting down. "Scientific research," Stephenson writes, "now reveals that sitting all day isn't just a little bit unhealthy; it's seriously and actively bad for you […] Ergonomic swivel chairs, it turns out, are the next asbestos".[1] Apart from the neologism in the essay's title, this is his only reference to asbestos: an indicator that, for Stephenson at least, the public health effects of asbestos are sufficiently well known so that its mere mention triggers the cascade of associations necessary for his title to be understood. If the target of Stephenson's metaphor—the hidden epidemic of sedentary-state health concerns—should persuade us to reappraise our chair-bound work habits, for the purposes of this essay I am more interested in his metaphoric source, "the next asbestos." Asbestos is the collective name for the family of natural mineral fibers that came to be used in the built environment because of their qualities as insulators and fire retardants. Even as asbestos's fortunes rose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so troubling reports of its health impact began to emerge. As evidence of its

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[1] Stephenson, "Arsebestos," 7.

risks began to outweigh that of its benefits, so the substance once referred to as a "magic mineral" for its capacity to mitigate risks (from fire, especially) began to be referred to as a "deadly" or "killer dust." Historically, then, asbestos has been associated with two contradictory crises. Originally, it proliferated through the built environment to prevent the rapid spread of fire. Subsequently, as its horrific, terminal illnesses became better known, its role in causing crises displaced its earlier function as a crisis preventer. Stephenson invokes this latter phase when he refers to "the next asbestos" as something "seriously and actively bad for you." Such inflections determine which of these crises is the particular referent under discussion.

Metaphors like Stephenson's rely on asbestos to highlight hitherto unknown forms of risk and they are by no means infrequent in their occurrence. "The next asbestos" has been used to describe things as diverse as carbon nanotubes, glyphosphate, opioids, talc, and AI in healthcare. These associations are used to warn people about public health issues, as in Stephenson's essay. The phrase is not confined to risky objects; it also designates the opportunities presented by such objects. It appears on investment sites or legal opinion pieces for more cynical reasons: asbestos tort is a multi-billion-dollar industry that has been damaging for insurance companies and lucrative for specialist lawyers. In this context, "the next asbestos" refers to the next major area of profitable litigation, an inflection popularized in the oeuvre of John Grisham.[2] Since "the previous asbestos" provided significant financial rewards at the expense of people's health, we

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[2] See, for instance, "the wave of asbestos litigation" in Grisham, *The Runaway Jury*, 16; "the asbestos wave" in Grisham, *The Summons*, 385; the "crazy class actions" on asbestos in Grisham, *The Appeal*, 118; and the "sharks" who "bankrupted [. . .] the entire American asbestos industry" in Grisham, *The King of Torts*, 320.

might take "the next asbestos" to signify financial gain at the cost of public health. Manufacturers of asbestos products were vulnerable to this litigation because they dissimulated, obfuscated, and mitigated health information about the substance. Here, "the next asbestos" might signify further crises for public trust: when supposedly impartial experts turn out to be partisan.

While the referents for "the next asbestos" diverge across these examples, the phrase maintains a rhetorical consistency because it depends upon, and further reinforces, an unspoken, collective sense of what asbestos is and does. This recursive collective understanding means that asbestos can easily be mobilized for different purposes. The cost of this mobilization is, of course, the sedimentation of an *impression*: that we know what "the next asbestos" means and therefore do not need to discuss it. But "the next asbestos," written at an earlier moment in history, meant the miraculous solution to an existing crisis rather than the cause of a new one. Recasting the phrase in light of this cultural contingency demonstrates the importance of context and audience when referring to "the asbestos crisis." In turn, this performance affects how cultural impressions build a relation of implicit, rather than explicit, understanding between the substance and a particular cultural group. The consequence is nothing less than an ecological populism that includes the local, national, and international mediation of resource actors, when engaging with the more recognized populist relation between leaders and "their" people.

Benjamin Moffitt describes the "performances" of crises, such as asbestos, as a constitutive feature of populism.[3] Whereas Ernesto Laclau or Chantal Mouffe might identify crisis as an external cause of populism, Moffitt suggests that we take the performance of crisis as internal to a populism he understands to be a "political style":

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[3] Moffitt, *Populism*, 5.

"the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performances made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life."[4] Although populism has not yet, to the best of my knowledge, been described as the new asbestos, I want to consider how the performance of two different inflections on "the asbestos crisis," given before and after broader public awareness of asbestos's risks, might expand our discussion of populism, thought broadly as a political style.

In its simplest sense, populism can be understood as an appeal to "the people," a reified amalgam of the citizenry *en masse*. In a correlative move, this reified unit, "the people," is opposed to a reified unit of others who are characterized by their exclusion (i.e., their not being incorporated into "the people"), and, depending on their financial and national status, they may be demonized as "elites" or "migrants."[5] In states historically characterized by representational democracy, recent forms of populism have tended to advocate for more direct rule by the people, often through the enabling powers of social media platforms, which appear to short-circuit traditional forms of mediation and the hierarchies they afford. As persons develop affinities with populism, their desire to identify with, and as, "the people" leads to more impassioned critiques of structures that emphasize representation over presentation, i.e., structures that claim to speak on behalf of the people rather than as the people in themselves. This urgent celebration of raw presentation effaces markers that position this "the people" as a rhetorical figure,

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[4] Ibid., 7.

[5] For a discussion of the linguistic complexity of this move, see James Underhill's *Creating Worldviews*, especially his discussion of "the people" in the context of Czechoslovak communist rhetoric (100–6).

constituted by the speaker, rather than an actual instance of pure presentation. The consequence is a paradox: a rhetorical figure whose proponents deny its figuration, and, moreover, whose success may be measured by the degree to which this figuration is effaced. Moffitt's elaboration on political style understands this paradoxical double movement as integral to the performance of populism, particularly when it mediates crisis, while claiming that this mediation is a simple (i.e., unmediated) presentation of failure. Asbestos serves as a substantial case study for this process. Parties interested in asbestos, from industry apologists to anti-asbestos activists, present the history of asbestos as an unmediated failure of legislation, either through concessions to banning it or through the failure to ban it earlier. But, as my earlier discussion of "the next asbestos" shows, a more fruitful parallel might be drawn between "asbestos" and "the people" as terms that are made to shuttle between presentation and representation.

Asbestos and populism share certain linguistic associations with terms like "susceptibility" and "exposure," as each undermines a personal or political "immune system" by compromising the health of the individual or attacking the checks and balances of representational democracy (most notably, the judiciary and the press). Metaphors of health, when used to describe the political, tend to re-enact the opposition between illness and health that characterizes much more of populist discourse than this essay can readily unpack. For the moment, then, I am rather more interested in the formal challenge presented by populism and asbestos to discursive analysis, since discourses around asbestos, like those about populism, present an unstable entity that changes its form in different contexts. In my opening examples, for instance, asbestos's metaphoric function of standing in for, or representing, something else (a future innovation or crisis) destabilizes the apparently uniform understanding of asbestos, upon which this metaphoric function rests (as an already-present innovation or crisis). To address this

formal fluctuation within what I am calling a populist ecology, I turn to David Foster Wallace's use of asbestos in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's encyclopedic novel about tennis prodigy Hal Incandenza, drug addict Don Gately, and the Quebecois Separatist Organization *Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* (AFR), otherwise known as the Wheelchair Assassins, in a dystopian near-future North American super-state, the Organization of North American Nations (ONAN).

Wallace draws on the same sedimented impression of asbestos's lethal consequences as Stephenson when he describes the father of Hal's Quebecois tennis opponent John Wayne: "Wayne's father is an asbestos miner who at forty-three is far and away the seniorest guy on his shift; he now wears triple-thick masks and is trying to hold on until John Wayne can start making serious $ and take him away from all this."[6] References to seniority, the triple-thick masks, "holding on," and "take him away from all this" imply the high mortality rate to be found amongst asbestos miners, whether from accidents in the mines or prolonged exposure to asbestos dust. Crucially, Wallace's description relies upon our already understanding asbestos's implicature as a known toxicant. Of course, no amount of "serious $" can really "take [Wayne's father] away from all this," since the asbestos will remain lodged in his lungs: he carries the residue of the mine wherever he goes. By emphasising the links between asbestos mining, the Waynes, and Quebec, the novel raises a number of entangled discourses that include the history of asbestos mining in Quebec, the role this mining history has played in Quebecois separatism (parodied in the AFR), and asbestos's role as a toxic commodity that crosses the Canada-US border. Far from being an idle language game, Wallace's asbestos points to a cultural problem that binds together Canada, once the largest asbestos supplier in the

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[6] Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 262.

world, and the United States, its biggest client. Read in this light, *Infinite Jest* obliquely connects the different, even opposite, populist concerns over asbestos in texts by the former Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Trudeau, and the 45th president of the United States of America, Donald Trump. Although a matter of social revolution for Trudeau and a vehicle for conspiracy theories for Trump, their shared interest in asbestos presents a wider optic for their diverse forms of populism than those included by Moffitt's performances. More than anything, *Infinite Jest* presents a conceptual site where the asbestos concerns of these two disparate populists sit side by side, without the reductive over-determinations of direct comparison.

By following individual discursive uses of asbestos as a populist phenomenon, I want to develop a parallel argument to that adopted by Jeb Barnes when he selects asbestos to illustrate larger institutional problems when engaging in US policy reform.[7] Barnes identifies asbestos tort litigation as a clear site where common-sense policy reform should have happened in the US, but did not. While asbestos litigation proved lucrative for Grisham's trial lawyers, it remains a hugely inefficient way of resolving compensation issues, for claimants, courts, and asbestos trusts. It therefore serves as a useful limit case for the "'politics of efficiency,' which frames reforms in terms of their potential to improve the overall efficiency of existing policies and institutional arrangements [and] can potentially diffuse partisan tensions."[8] In order to show why the asbestos case points to a failure of the politics of efficiency, Barnes identifies six factors in US policy that should have facilitated change: support from policy entrepreneurs, Republican majorities, bipartisan support, judicial calls for legislation, high administrative costs, and expert

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[7] See Jeb Barnes, *Dust-up*.

[8] Ibid., 7.

consensus on the lack of benefit from litigation. Despite these factors, efforts to reform asbestos litigation failed, Barnes explains, because of "drift" ("the shift in the impact of programs on social life through changing circumstances"), "conversion" ("the reinterpretation of existing rules and programs"), and "layering" ("the adding of new institutional arrangements without eliminating old ones").[9] Existing compensation programs focused on accidents, which meant that they were not fit to respond to asbestos's progressive chronic illnesses, which take years to manifest. The drift experienced between what the programmes offered and what their claimants needed led to increased litigation to cover the discrepancy. The lack of direct legislation meant that trial lawyers needed to convert existing rules on product liability to address cases of occupational exposure (through what Claude Lévi-Strauss might have called "bricolage"). Rather than attempting to renegotiate this layering of tort law over workers' compensation programs, further layers of administrative remedy developed through the creation of asbestos trusts. But, because these trusts disburse funds on the basis of their liquidity, rather than the merits of the case, and because tort legislation remains a legitimate recourse, cases that have not received adequate compensation are still taken to the courts.

Barnes considers asbestos reform because it is a "likely case," where "recognized explanatory factors (or 'independent variables') within the literature point toward an outcome—but this outcome does not occur."[10] Like Barnes, I want to draw on cases of asbestos use and misuse to signal auspicious failures of imagination in particular cultures of populism. Because my concepts—populism, culture—are necessarily fuzzier than

[9] Ibid., 93.

[10] Ibid., 107.

Barnes's more empirically grounded synthesis of quantitative and qualitative methods, these failures are less helpful as claims about future political action than as indicators of past and present strategies in cultural populism. Moreover, Barnes, by showing a fairly uniform cultural understanding of asbestos at work, can establish a set of rational responses to its tort reform, whereas, as I will show, responses to asbestos, like those to populism, generate quite different, often contradictory views, depending on both the beliefs of the respondents and their respective understandings of the term at play (whether asbestos or populism). Nevertheless, if we follow Laclau in identifying the formation of populism through "the dichotomisation of the social space through the creation of an internal frontier, and the construction of an equivalential chain between unfulfilled demands," we can find in Barnes's "drift" the seeds of an internal frontier between sufferers and lawmakers that the equivalent chain of "conversion" and "layering" only serves further to consolidate.[11] In what follows, I do not want to grant asbestos an outsized role in the thinking of the populists I discuss; rather, by virtue of its relative insignificance, asbestos affords a peculiar insight into why certain decisions become politically expedient for populists. It introduces us to a populist ecology, wherein populist decisions, whether by Trump or Trudeau, are made not simply to frame and reify the people, but also for, and under the influence of, the resource actors that serve to consolidate these people, whether as miners, workers, or victims.

Insofar as it imagines the historical consolidation of ONAN through the performance of a series of crises, *Infinite Jest* may be read as a site that models populist ecology in an age of hyper-saturated mediation. This extends to discussions of populism, an argument N. Katherine Hayles has made regarding the novel's ecology, in which

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[11] Laclau, "Populism," 38.

environmental contamination and "the toxic dynamics percolating through the media" come to be coproduced through recursive integration.[12] I agree with Hayles that *Infinite Jest* "shows that the idea of an autonomous liberal subject can be a recipe for disaster in a world densely interconnected with interlocking complex systems."[13] But I want to extend Hayles's argument to include the novel's depiction of populism. This can help us to think about populism itself as ecological, especially in its reliance on the recursive integration of previously unconnected streams of information.

The novel's more recent reception history suggests this might be as true for criticisms of populism as for populism itself. The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016 has brought about renewed interest in the novel's consideration of populism. In Wallace's novel, the lounge singer, Johnny Gentle, is elected president after a Trump-style campaign that promised to "Clean Up America" (a parallel to Trump's "Make America Great Again"). At least as early as February 2016, message boards dedicated to *Infinite Jest* began to develop readings of Gentle as Trump's analog. Commentators noted how the two presidents share an inability to handle the complexities of the office, relying instead upon populist campaigns that promise to reform America, supported by an authority more reliant on economic privilege and celebrity status than political gravitas, and buttressed by bellicose threats of nuclear annihilation to resolve matters of pique.[14] These associations are no mere coincidence. They reflect the interplay

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[12] Hayles, "Illusion," 686.

[13] Ibid., 696.

[14] u/deleted, "[Infinite Jest] Anyone else noticing parallels between Trump and President John Gentle?" *Reddit*, 28 February 2016.

https://www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/484ib0/infinite_jest_anyone_else_noticing_parallels

of cultural cues embedded in the Trump campaign's carefully curated nostalgia. Wallace wrote Gentle as an analog for Ronald Reagan. Trump's 2016 campaign built itself largely on Reagan nostalgia (not least in its slogan). Cult efforts to find in *Infinite Jest* intimations of actual political events in our present rest upon the novel's evocation of a cultural mood or atmosphere that made the eventual return to a Reagan-style populist figure inevitable. In other words, the novel became itself an object in a system that confirmed Hayles's thesis about its ecological recursivity.

But *Infinite Jest* is not just interested in the populism of celebrity politicians; it is also interested in how this populism depends, as Moffitt writes, on crises that are performed as a matter of style. Here, again, Hayles anticipates my line of thinking by introducing Gentle's clean-up campaign as an illustration of recursivity. The clean-up campaign consists largely in redirecting waste to a substantial area of New England, with the consequence that this area becomes toxic and uninhabitable. The solution to this new crisis is imagined as a process of "experialism," an inverse imperialism that cedes unwanted territory to others. By "gifting" the land to Canada, Gentle and his aides hope to redefine the crisis as a matter of foreign, rather than domestic, policy. The area is named the Great Concavity because it appears as a concave incursion into the United States on the map of North America. When Canada attempts to refuse, it is threatened with nuclear fallout. As a consequence, neither country claims the area, which, for Canada, becomes the Great Convexity. Like Bir Tawil, the *de facto* area of *terra nullius* between Egypt and

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/. See also cducey2013, "Trump the Political Jester, David Foster Wallace the Cultural Prophet", *Writing Folly Blog*, 18 February 2017. https://writingfolly.wordpress.com/2017/02/18/trump-the-political-jester-david-foster-wallace-the-cultural-prophet/

Sudan, the experialism of the Great Con. (whether -cavity or -vexity) relies on the two logical claimants' both renouncing their claim. Following Hayles, waste recirculates by first displacing it to the Great Con. and then ejecting the Con. itself from the nation's geography. While Hayles correctly assesses Wallace's dynamic systems thinking, she does not address Wallace's patent interest in the complexity that things themselves bring to these systems. In this respect, the covert role played by asbestos in the narrative serves as a small but powerful exemplar of how Wallace's engagement with populism's ecology retains an interest in the substantive qualities of things and substances.[15]

I have already mentioned the AFR, the Quebecois separatists who, in one of the novel's numerous subplots, are looking for the novel's eponymous film, "Infinite Jest." Like Monty Python's killer joke, watching the film is lethal for its audience precisely because of its ability to distract them from the job of living. The AFR wants to use it as a terror device to bring about the secession of Quebec, the return of the Great Con., and the end of ONAN. Wallace explicitly links the AFR to asbestos in an elaborate endnote (n. 304), where he identifies the origins of the AFR among the sons of asbestos miners in Quebec. The endnote, presented as a description of a student trying to plagiarize an overwritten academic text, describes a game, *Le Jeu du Prochain Train*, that originates "among the male offspring of asbestos, nickel and zinc miners."[16] "The sons of asbestos miners," Wallace explains, are "orphaned and desperately poor."[17] The young men compete by jumping over train tracks in the face of an oncoming train. The first to jump loses, but the last, while technically the winner, frequently risks the loss of one or both

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[15] For an engaging account of Wallace's interest in things, see Jansen, "Porousness," 56.

[16] Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 1058.

[17] Ibid., 1059.

legs, hence their later association with the wheelchairs of the AFR. These poor and orphaned sons present the obverse option to that of John Wayne's asbestos-mining father: asbestos-related disability faces them whether they choose mining or political separatism. Andrea Boggio, writing of Belgian asbestos workers who continued to work with asbestos despite knowing its dangers, called their resigned acceptance of their inevitable demise "pragmatic fatalism" (of a kind we see in Wayne's father).[18] But the young men of *Le jeu* seem to experience this exposure to asbestos and to poverty as a nihilistic fatalism. The story of the game suggests that nihilism about toxic ecology and entrenched poverty underpins the political activism of the Wheelchair Assassins.

This becomes a political engagement with asbestos and populism when we consider links between Wallace's fictional AFR, the actual 1970s Separatist organization that inspired it, the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ), mentioned in *Infinite Jest* as one of the AFR's rivals, and the 1949 Asbestos Strike.[19] In *A Town Called Asbestos*, the history of the Quebec mining town that is also home to the Jeffrey Mine, the largest open asbestos mine in the world, Jessica Van Horssen describes the FLQ as "a political terrorist group in the province committed to Quebec sovereignty."[20] Importantly, Pierre Vallières, one of the intellectual leaders of the FLQ, "rooted the ideals of the province's terrorist movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the 1949 [Asbestos] strike" in his controversial (and offensively titled) *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*, translated by Joan Pinkham as *White N*****s of America* (1966/1971).[21] Asbestos, then, does not simply reference risk and

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[18] Boggio, *Compensating*, 47.

[19] Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 722.

[20] Van Horssen, *Asbestos*, 171.

[21] Ibid., 171.

inevitable disability in the novel; the Separatism subplot gestures to a longer history of asbestos as a commodity in a political economy that included Quebec's relationship with the rest of Canada and with the United States. To understand how this political economy creates relations between these regions, organizations (fictional or nonfictional), and Wallace's asbestos-mining sons, we need to go back to the FLQ's own origin story, the 1949 Asbestos Strike.

On the 14th of February 1949, after a protracted negotiation between representatives of the Asbestos Corporation and the Canadian affiliates of the US Johns-Manville Company, and officials of the National Federation of Mining Industry Employees (on behalf of the Canadian and Catholic Confederation of Labour), Quebecois asbestos workers walked off four mines in the Eastern Townships, near the Asbestos and Thetford Mines. The miners had thirteen demands, including the elimination of asbestos dust, a wage increase, and provisions for holidays, overtime, and greater oversight by the unions. The situation was complicated by clear national lines dividing mine worker from mine owner. Whereas the mines were largely owned by US or British companies, the striking miners were Francophone Quebecois. Moreover, they were shocked when the premier of Quebec, Maurice Duplessis, came out in support of the mine owners. This galvanized a whole generation of young Quebecois intellectuals to argue for the intellectual importance of the strike for Quebec identity in the international labor movement. One such intellectual was Pierre Trudeau, later Prime Minister of Canada, who would go on to edit the seminal early history of the strike: *La grève de l'amiante* or *The Asbestos Strike* (1956).

A striking case of asbestos's entanglement with discursive populism may be found in Trudeau's contributions to *La grève de l'amiante*, including Trudeau's oft-quoted reference to the strike as a "crisis" with society-altering effects: "For many people,

however, the drama at Asbestos was a violent announcement that a new era had begun … For them, this strike is a turning point in the entire religious, political, social, and economic history of the Province of Quebec."[22] Trudeau's making of this "announcement" turns the Asbestos strike into an event of popular self-recognition. In its insistence on crisis and reification of a people, formed in no small part by their opposition to outside forces, Trudeau's declaration fits Moffitt's description of a populist utterance.

Trudeau's history of the Asbestos strike grandly announces itself, as well as its subject, through a series of rhetorical questions that culminate in the realization that "a whole generation hesitates on the brink of commitments. We hope this work has offered it some basic principles to assist it in making its decision."[23] Despite this discrepancy with local views, he hastens to add that "my comrades and I have not fallen victim to that malady which a cynical turn of thought is beginning to call *the opium of the intellectuals*," which he understands to be the weak messianism of proletarian or revolutionary mystique.[24] Rather, success must be found in a clearly supported relation between industrialization and a powerful labor movement. And yet, this industrialization is only possible, Trudeau claims at the end of his first chapter, because the strike revealed the sclerotic connection between the corrupt state and foreign capital: "the asbestos strike, however, was significant because it occurred at a time when we were witnessing the passing of a world, precisely at a moment when our social framework—the worm-eaten remnants of a bygone age—were ready to come apart."[25] In keeping with Laclau's

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[22] Trudeau, *Strike*, 329.

[23] Ibid., 349.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 67.

understanding of populism as a political logic that establishes a division where none was seen previously, Trudeau's "worm-eaten remnants" summarizes a lengthy discussion of how workers, despite accounting for "close to two thirds of our economic production," "counted for almost nothing in our social thought, our Church, our institutions."[26] Indeed, when significant figures in the Catholic Church sided with the miners against the provincial legislature, this broke, Trudeau argues, the core alliance between Church and State that had maintained a conservative suspicion of "industrialization."[27] This is why the strike is frequently referred to as a catalyst for the Quiet Revolution, the name given to the period of socio-political and socio-economic change in Quebec under the Premiership of Jean Lesage.

La grève de l'amiante is a populist tract, since, for all its scholarship, it advocates strongly for the inclusion of groups previously silenced, in opposition to existing organizations described in the uncomplimentary language of disease and decay, and in response to a moment of crisis for which it blames these institutions. Interestingly, Trudeau concludes his opening chapter by asserting that asbestos itself is irrelevant to the matter:

> It is the date, rather than the place or the particular industry, that is decisive. The strike might well have happened elsewhere, for at this time the Quebec proletariat had been led, by the logic of its own development, to win a place for itself in the community corresponding to its numbers and its social unity. As it happened, it

[26] Ibid., 66.

[27] Ibid., 65.

> was the asbestos that caught fire! This book is dedicated to the history of that conflagration.[28]

His final, captivating rhetorical flourish aside, Trudeau dismisses any intrinsic connection to asbestos itself, despite the first of the miners' demands being their protection from a dust they already knew would kill them. In a sense, then, his performance is dated by his relative ignorance of the public health problems associated with asbestos, problems which make subsequent allusions to asbestos less easy to view as a straightforward commodity.

There are two complications to identifying Trudeau's text as populist. Trudeau's subsequent success, as the first Quebec premier of Canada, was accompanied by a personal popularity, a phenomenon referred to as "Trudeaumania," which raises a fraught question as to whether Trudeau's later popularity predisposes us to categorize him, unfairly, as a populist. Second, Trudeau's long and painstaking history of the strike, in presenting a comprehensive account of the strike's context and unabashedly celebrating the representationalism constituted by the trade union movement, bears little resemblance to the bare assertions or anti-representational discourse that characterize recent forms of populism.

Yet, as Van Horssen explains, Trudeau's history did, in a sense, displace local concerns to serve a larger intellectual purpose; she observes that the only chapter of *La grève de l'amiante* to study the community in detail, the one by Maurice Sauvé, "acknowledged the harmonious industrial relations in Asbestos since the conflict."[29] "It would be Trudeau's book," she continues, "not the strike itself, that would influence how

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[28] Ibid., 67.

[29] Van Horssen, *Asbestos*, 170.

the province viewed Asbestos . . . in the decades to come. Townspeople did not see themselves as at the forefront of radical political change, and they did not want the notoriety that came with that perception."[30] If Trudeau's study misrepresented the feelings of the Asbestos community about the strike, this misrepresentation was, if anything, further consolidated by Vallières' writings about the FLQ, a misconception that Wallace apparently perpetuates in his descriptions of the AFR. What divorces Wallace's novel from this sedimented history, however, is its heightened attention to the physical costs of mining, not simply as it affects individuals but as it affects environments.

On the question of asbestos environments, too, we can find an analog in *Infinite Jest*. To exist as an entity, ONAN depends on a mutual non-recognition, or experialism, of the Convexity/Concavity by the US and Canada. While asbestos is not mentioned in relation to this larger political situation, Wallace's repeated use of Quebec asbestos (in conjunction with the AFR and elsewhere) opens up a pattern of associations. For the history of asbestos delivers us a real-life analog for the Great Concavity: the Jeffrey Mine, the largest open asbestos mine in the world, which is located at Asbestos, Quebec. Van Horssen tracks the symbiotic relation that developed between the Jeffrey Mine and Asbestos. She notes that, as the mine grew, it began to engulf parts of the town. In 1948 the town conceded significant parts of its original high street and center to facilitate this growth. The Jeffrey Mine was owned and operated by the American company Johns-Manville, already mentioned in relation to the 1949 Asbestos Strike, as one of the most important of the foreign-owned companies against which the miners mobilized. Disputes over the mine, a literal concavity, by Quebec miners and US business interests serve as a compelling historical precedent to the novel's negotiations over the Great

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[30] Ibid., 171.

Concavity/Convexity. But this also means that we can read the novel's engagement with Quebec Nationalism as more than merely the comic use of separatism: this separatist impulse establishes that the bodies of the miners (and their sons) have become the disavowed stakes of such populist endeavors.

Both Trudeau and the FLQ's Pierre Vallières established a line of difference between the Asbestos miners and their US bosses to facilitate their political ends, relying upon the political logic of populism later elucidated by Laclau and Mouffe. These ends were largely incompatible, even contradictory: Trudeau, a federalist, was looking to the strike as a definitive rejection of Quebecois exceptionalism, whereas Vallières, a secessionist, hoped it might spark further calls for Quebec's independence. This incompatibility has, in other areas, led to astute assessments that populism should be regarded as a weak ideology that attaches itself to stronger ideological positions, whether fascistic, democratic, or authoritarian. But neither of the contending figures cared overly for asbestos's qualities per se: it was a pure commodity, in that it was treated as completely fungible. Nevertheless, Trudeau's rhetorical indifference to asbestos's qualities did not make his populist narrative any less dependent upon it. As Trudeau saw it, the Jeffrey Mine was already a toxic concavity of contested space, between foreign economic interests and an emergent national political consciousness. To access this higher order political economy in *Infinite Jest*, however, we have to route our analysis through Wallace's engagement with the direct and indirect costs of asbestos mining. Populists dispense with matters of complexity through a rhetorical efficiency that reifies, conflates, and otherwise condenses these issues into easily communicated vectors. By insisting on the more immediate consequences of the rhetoric before addressing its larger political implications, Wallace's treatment of asbestos suggests how this condensation process might be short-circuited.

Returning to the casual comparison of Johnny Gentle and Donald Trump as the basis for rethinking the meaning of Trump's populism in light of the novel, we might think about how *Infinite Jest*'s engagement with asbestos's past might also anticipate problems of ecological populism in its future. In particular, I am interested in how *Infinite Jest*'s engagement with asbestos history interfaces with Trump's own references to asbestos to elucidate aspects of his populist rhetoric. Trump's public support for asbestos is sufficiently pronounced for it to have led to a persistent anxiety about weakened regulations on the sale of asbestos products in the US. This anxiety was only heightened when Uralasbest, the Russian asbestos company, posted photos of asbestos products wrapped in plastic stamped with Trump's image on Facebook in July 2018. Subsequently the company revealed that the photos were "fakes," generated as a publicity stunt. But this episode did lead to a slew of articles, revivifying Trump's history of endorsing asbestos products.

On at least three occasions, Donald Trump has testified to the benefits of asbestos. These statements are broadly representative of three discursive strategies he has used in developing his populism: imaginary conspiracies, oppositions between "the people" and their "ruling elites," and nativist mythographies that draw on shared national triumphs or tragedies. First, in his book *The Art of the Comeback*, he and his co-author, Kate Bohner, wrote:

> Asbestos is the greatest fireproofing material ever used, and everybody in the construction industry knows it. It is also 100% safe, once applied. But early on, asbestos got a bad rap because of the fact that miners who were digging asbestos for many years would often develop asbestosis, and therefore people thought that asbestos was not safe. I'm not saying it's the greatest material to work with. I'm

> only saying it's the safest material in terms of fire. A huge and concerted effort was made to have asbestos removed from buildings, causing tremendous dislocation and destruction and creating a new problem: asbestos floating in the air.
>
> I believe that the movement against asbestos was led by the mob, because it was often mob-related companies that would do the asbestos removal. Great pressure was put on politicians, and as usual, the politicians relented. Millions of truckloads of this incredible fireproofing material were taken to special "dump sites" because of this stupid law.[31]

In 2005, before a Senate Committee, Trump again called asbestos "the greatest fire-proofing material ever made."[32] In a tweet published on the anniversary of 9/11 in 2012, he claimed "If we didn't remove incredibly powerful fire retardant asbestos & replace it with junk that doesn't work, the World Trade Center would never have burned down."[33] The tweet repeats his prior claim that asbestos is a powerful fire retardant (true), while also suggesting that it might have somehow prevented the destruction of the Twin Towers (false) or that it is "100% safe, once applied" (also false). Trump codes conspiracies into his references to asbestos removal, claiming that politicians give up the security asbestos offers to benefit their funders. The nation, the "people," are therefore compromised by

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[31] Trump and Bohner, *Comeback*, 83-84.

[32] *MSNBC*, "Trump's Longtime Love Affair."

[33] (@realDonaldTrump), ".@dubephnx If we didn't remove incredibly powerful fire retardant asbestos & replace it with junk that doesn't work, the World Trade Center would never have burned down." October 17, 2012, 12:47 pm.

politicians beholden to the mob, whose actions facilitated formative national traumas, like the collapse of the Twin Towers.

If the material trajectory of Trump's utterances—from written memoir to televised Senate hearing to Twitter—parallels the ways other populist movements have turned to social media to bypass traditional gatekeepers, Trump's 1997 mob conspiracy demonstrates how the performance of crisis frequently interfaces with existing narratives. Trump identifies a "huge and concerted effort" on the part of "the mob" to orchestrate asbestos removal. Fans of the HBO television show about the Italian crime family, *The Sopranos*, might recognize this as one of the story threads of the final season. In the episode "Kennedy and Heidi," which premiered in May 2007, ten years after *The Art of the Comeback* was published, the antagonist of the final series, Phil Leotardo, finds out that his trucks have been dumping asbestos for the show's protagonist, Tony Soprano. He demands 25% of Tony's earnings for the illegal dumping, before jettisoning the asbestos into a local lake. Phil's asbestos ultimatum proves to be the catalyst for the cycle of revenge killings that will end his life and, possibly, Tony's by the show's conclusion. The dumping scene invites comparison with Trump's conspiracy because, conducted as it is in silence, by twilight, at a secluded location, and in an obviously illegal act of environmental contamination, it suggests an already formed cultural imaginary about mob-related asbestos disposal. In *The Sopranos*, Tony and Phil's disposal activities are obviously illegal in their use of what Trump calls "special 'dump sites.'" Trump, however, is less concerned with the places where asbestos ends up than with the legislative processes that enabled the disposal. In this sense, the "mob" stands in for any business that successfully co-opts legislation to ensure its enrichment, i.e., state capture. For Trump, the problem is not the legal infringements of the Tonys and Phils of the mob, but that asbestos abatement has become a legal requirement. The failure Trump foments

into a crisis is, then, the unfair legislation against asbestos, enacted by "crooked" politicians.

While Trump iterated these asbestos myths long before his election in 2016, they display similar rhetorical patterns to his "birtherist" demand to see Barak Obama's birth certificate, or his subsequent comments on Hillary Clinton, migrants, and "the Swamp." In this sense, Trump's "old asbestos" conforms to what Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum have called "the new conspiracism": "classic conspiracism, warranted or not, was precisely to prove that the real configuration of power was concealed. The new conspiracism, with its innuendo and bare assertion, does not even try to make sense of power. And by delegitimating democratic institutions, the new conspiracism actually obscures power."[34] For, although Trump appears to connect "the mob" to "politicians," these groups are kept disturbingly vague (through "innuendo") and Trump's "we," as invoked in his 2012 tweet, is similarly difficult to locate. Muirhead and Rosenblum suggest two responses to mitigate the corrosive effects of the new conspiracism: enacting democracy and speaking truth to conspiracy. In the case of Trump's references to asbestos, both strategies have enjoyed some, albeit limited, success.

On the basis of a 2016 motion, Judge Loretta A. Preska unsealed records about a 1998 settlement secured by Trump's lawyers a year after the publication of *The Art of the Comeback*. The settlement pertained to a series of trials and appeals around the 1980 demolition of the Bonwit Teller building on New York's Fifth Avenue, currently the site of Trump Tower. Trump employed a group of 200 undocumented Polish workers, through William Kaszycki of Kaszycki & Sons, to handle the demolition, even though Kaszycki had no expertise in demolition. The workers worked for twelve-hour shifts, without hard

[34] Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People*, 164.

hats, gloves, or masks, and at less than half the union wage. In interviews with the *New York Times*, given in 1998 around the time of the settlement, Wojciech Kozak and other workers on the site said they "often worked in choking clouds of asbestos dust without protective equipment."[35] If enacting the institutions of democracy—motions for Freedom of Information and reports by the free press—facilitates our awareness of Trump's own complicity with certain forms of irresponsible asbestos abatement, the proximity between the settlement and the publication of *The Art of the Comeback* suggests that Trump's views on asbestos may be less detached from economic expediency than they first appear.

In fact, Trump had much to gain from appearing to see asbestos as safe, to ward against future liabilities. Given his own building contracts, we might read the equivocations in *The Art of the Comeback* as more significant than they first appear. Trump acknowledges, for instance, that "asbestos floating in the air" created "a new problem" and "that miners who were digging asbestos for many years would often develop asbestosis". Nevertheless, he offsets these dangers by reiterating its importance as a "fireproofing material" and passing off the "new problem" as the product of asbestos abatement. Tellingly, he insulates his claims about asbestos's benefits through a series of caveats. So, he specifies, "I'm *not* saying it's the greatest material to work with" (my emphasis). Moreover, he qualifies, it is "100% safe, *once applied*" (my emphasis). One might be surmise, then, a certain disingenuity at work, as he slips from acknowledging its dangers and qualifying his own praise for its qualities.

Reporting on this history presents Trump's use of asbestos (and asbestos companies' use of Trump) as cynical opportunism. While the accusation of cynical opportunism might derive from "enacted democracy" and "speaking truth to conspiracy,"

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[35] Raab, "After 15 Years," 36.

it seems unlikely to offset the relationship Trump's conspiracies reinforce between the man and his "base," or primary group of voters. There are clear empirical antecedents that justify this scepticism: his supporters' dismissive euphemism, "locker room talk," to describe his misogynistic crudity, for instance, or their collective outrage over the Robert Mueller investigation. Formally, the reliance on institutions and *parrhesia*, or truth-telling, demands a faith in linguistic stability that no longer holds. Here, Wallace's introduction of a populist ecology helps to shift our focus from linguistic stability to recursive patterning, as suggested by Hayles. We might then observe that populist utterances about asbestos attempt to contain or simplify its plurality of significances. In mediating this plurality for populist purposes, Trudeau and Trump reveal a rhetorical technique, approximating what Moffitt calls political style, whereby the complex is rendered simple, stripped of entanglement in a larger political ecology. This technique is made more evident if we unpick the otherwise seamless integration of what asbestos is with what these populists mobilize it to represent.

Reading *Infinite Jest* alongside both the USA's recent celebrity president and the history of the town of Asbestos contributes to our broader discussion of populism and crisis by recalling that the creation of crisis relies on establishing lines of difference, fictitious or not, that are reinforced by reciprocal cultural responses by the so-called other. Laclau's political logic holds, in this sense, but only if it is supported by Moffitt's expansion of the logic to address modes of political style. The overlapping Concavity/Convexity offers just such an instance of political style, insofar as it acts as a spatial correlative to the populist discourses around asbestos mobilized by Trudeau and Trump. For Trudeau, asbestos merely offered a site for a necessary political event. He ascribes little significance to the asbestos itself. In this respect, his style seems wholly at odds with Trump's, whose praise of asbestos appears to stem from the substance's great

qualities. Whereas Trudeau worries about asbestos only insofar as it is a fungible object for his principal concern—the labor of Canadian miners—Trump dismisses asbestosis amongst asbestos miners for giving the substance a "bad rap," because he thinks of its usefulness wholly in relation to the built environment. From the perspective of a Canadian Convexity, asbestos needs to be seen as the material product of mining labor, a construct that appeals to Trudeau, the advocate for labor rights, in his early populist text. According to a US Concavity, however, asbestos is less important as a product of mining than as a manufactured product that merges with the built environment, which concerns Trump as a property developer. Parallels between Trudeau and Trump, which might otherwise dwell on their exploitation of a certain celebrity status to develop political capital, become more evident, and more complex, when thought through asbestos as a site of shared interest with a plurality of associations and meanings that can trigger strong emotions in audiences concerned with the issue.

For Barnes, asbestos tort reform offered a case study that might elevate itself beyond the particularities of its circumstance to become paradigmatic of the obstructions that face general policy reform in the USA. In part, Barnes's preoccupation with the relation between the particular and the paradigm reflect methodological concerns more germane to social policy than literary studies. Nevertheless, there is something in the populist treatment of asbestos that may be taken as paradigmatic for populism's treatment of objects. For, if theories of populism tend to focus on the subjects involved—the populist leader, their supporting organization, the people targeted, or all of the above—it is also necessary to consider how populist discourses reshape, reclassify, or reconstitute the objects or substances that operate at the heart of the debate. Such objects, we find when we return to Stephenson's essay on "the next asbestos," are often glided over, not because they are insignificant but because their significance can be, and frequently is,

taken for granted. Indeed, the objects might be said to impact the debate precisely insofar as they are treated as stable referents within a broadly accepted, if unstated, cultural imaginary. When we return to Trudeau's and Trump's writings on asbestos, via the populist ecology of *Infinite Jest*, we find that they do not just signal asbestos's plurality. They reflect populism's reliance on a recursively reified object.

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