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I Am an Author: Performing Authorship in Literary Culture

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Media, Art and Text at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

I AM AN AUTHOR: PERFORMING AUTHORSHIP IN LITERARY CULTURE

By Justin Russell Greene, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Media, Art and Text at Virginia Commonwealth University

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

Major Director: Richard Fine, Ph.D., Professor, Department of English

Authorship is not merely an act of putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard; it is a social identity performance that includes the use of multiple media. Authors must be hyper-visible to cut through the dearth of information, entertainment options, and personae vying for attention in our supersaturated media environment. As they enter the literary world, writers consciously create characters and narratives around themselves, and through the consistent and believable enactment of these features, authors are born. In this dissertation, I analyze the performance of authorship in U.S. literary culture through an interdisciplinary framework. My work pulls from authorship studies, performance studies, celebrity/persona studies, and sociological studies of art to uncover how writers create and disseminate their authorial identities. The writers used in this project embody four types of authorial identity: Jonathan Franzen as the professional artist, David Foster Wallace as the Romantic genius, Tao Lin as the digital eccentric, and Roxane Gay as the Intersectional Feminist. These writers flirt with popular recognition, but they remain tied firmly to the serious, or in a Bourdieuvian sense, restricted area of cultural production. As my case studies progress, I highlight how print, audio/visual, and digital media are used or not used by these writers as sites for their performances. I claim that as writers develop their characters on such digital platforms as Twitter and Tumblr that they are

more accepting of the validity of digital authorship. However, this acceptance is diminished by the dominant role print media have in the conceptions of authorship. The varying ways literary tradition, media, and celebrity intersect are brought to the forefront in these examples, shedding light on the need for larger conceptions of authorship in the literary world. My interpretation of authorship as social identity performance broadens a relatively restrictive and, in many ways, stagnant area, adding nuance to how literary culture actively works to maintain and dilute the value of one of its most prominent features.

Introduction

Preparing the Author's Stage

Not merely an act of writing, authorship is also a social identity. Putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard does not make an author. Historically, that identity has been fluid and complex. The etymology of the term “author” shows this fluidity. It developed from the Latin word *augere*, “to increase,” and went through many changes in the English language before its present usage, which dates from about or near 1382.¹ *Auctor*, meaning “a person with authority to take action or make a decision, guarantor, surety, person who approves or authorizes, person who has weight or authority,” is the foremost root, and although it has lost the religious aspects associated with this early form, “author” has maintained, over the centuries, its relationship to authority and power.² According to Donald Pease, “Unlike the medieval *auctor* who based his authority on divine revelation, an author *himself* claimed authority for his words and based his individuality on the stories he composed.”³ The push to claim authority over, but more importantly ownership of, intellectual property leads to writers constructing authorial identities.

¹ See “author, n.,” OED Online, January 2018, Oxford University Press, accessed February 23, 2018, [http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/view/Entry/13329?result=1&rskey=iCj7Jy&](http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/view/Entry/13329?result=1&rskey=iCj7Jy&seealso); see also Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London: Routledge, 2005); Donald E. Pease, “Author,” in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. Seán Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

² “author, n.”

³ Donald E. Pease, “Author,” in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. Seán Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 266.

In this manner, “author” is a relatively new social identity, and although it is easy to believe authors have existed since the early days of writing, that is not actually the case. The figure of the author we think of today is a relatively modern construction closely associated with the social, technological, and economic changes of the Print Revolution and the Enlightenment. The proliferation of printed material and the need to create “intellectual” property first connected authorship, identity, and commodities.⁴ Martha Woodmansee locates the beginnings of modern authorship in the eighteenth-century with the creation of new conceptions of property and laws that grant legal and economic status to certain individuals. Intellectual property is the lynchpin for authorship, according to Woodmansee, because this period was “a transitional phase between the limited patronage of an aristocratic society and the democratic patronage of the marketplace.”⁵ The social, political, economic, and technological changes brought about during the Enlightenment period altered the structure of literary production.

Authorial individuality emerged during this period, which, according to Foucault, could be interpreted as “the privileged moment” in “the notion of ‘author.’”⁶ Breaking away from the

⁴ Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 120-121. See also Martha Woodmansee, “The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the ‘Author,’” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 425-448.

⁵ Martha Woodmansee, “The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the ‘Author,’” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 433. See also Rose, *Authors and Owners*; William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993); Richard Fine, *James M. Cain and the American Author’s Authority* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 11-14; John Hartley, “Authorship and the Narrative of the Self,” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, eds. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.): 23-47, accessed March 29, 2017, *ProQuest ebrary*, <http://site.ebrary.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/lib/vacommonwealth/detail.action?docID=1066255>.

⁶ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon, 1984): 101.

authority of the State and the church, writers could now control some aspects of the creation of literary texts. Although the publisher enjoyed exponentially greater rights than the writer, it was possible to earn a living by writing. Woodmansee finds that the literary marketplace of eighteenth-century Europe allowed many writers to gain income through their works, but this living was precarious due to the public's shifting tastes.⁷ The marketplace became a way to break free from the patronage system, but instead of completely liberating the writer, it only remade it through capitalism.

Dynamic economic change during the eighteenth-century opened up new paths of social mobility, and one was through literature. Roland Barthes claims that capitalism establishes the author in society and culture, in his (in)famous essay "The Death of the Author."⁸ Through capitalism, the literary object and also the identity of the author become marketable commodities. Woodmansee finds in "The Interests in Disinterestedness" that the writer's ability to create commodities for the middle class was essential in establishing "new institutions" that regulated socio-cultural actions.⁹ Authorship became intellectual labor, thus distinguishing itself from other forms of work, particularly manufacturing and manual labor.¹⁰ As writers were immersing themselves in the literary marketplace and new conceptions of property, the publishing industry was, in fact, becoming another form of patronage. According to David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, the patronage system morphed into one based on the

⁷ Woodmansee, "The Genius," 432.

⁸ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-143.

⁹ Woodmansee, "The Interests in Disinterestedness: Karl Philipp Moritz and the Emergence of the Theory of Aesthetic Autonomy in Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Modern Language Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1984): 35, doi:10.1215/00267929-45-1-22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

marketplace instead of aristocratic privilege. They contend that the growing power of media producers—newspapers, magazines, publishers—forced writers to establish connections within these areas to have their work noticed and published.¹¹ Legal punishment became another factor, according to Foucault, that linked the author with the privileges of ownership in a Capitalist society.¹² For Foucault, the dynamic connections of “author’s rights, author-publisher relations, rights of reproduction, and related matters” initiated the author within the judicial as well as the economic system. Foucault believes that these “benefits of ownership” allowed for the author to move away from his patronage to the aristocracy, but at the same time be subjected to another form of power. This intersection of capitalism, law, and identity produced a tension between creating art and creating a product, and this divide was something many writers sought to bridge through redefining the “author.”

Laying the foundation for aspects of cultural production to this day, Romanticism formed a discourse around writing, literature, art, and authors that privileged them over the marketplace and industrialized society. The Romantics expanded upon the ideas of individuality and aesthetics developed during the Enlightenment to form a concept of authorship that stressed the power of the artist to create. For the Romantic author, artistic creation was significant “‘cultural’ as opposed to ‘industrial’ labor,” as Pease points out.¹³ Distinguishing their products as meaningful and significant involved distancing the writer from the “craftsman” identity that

¹¹ David Finkelstein, and Alistair McCleery, *An Introduction to Book History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 74.

¹² Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 108.

¹³ Pease, 267.

adhered to authorship in the past.¹⁴ One way to do this was through the idea of original genius. The genius was not created through mechanical or physical labor; he was born connected to the artistic and intellectual world. Woodmansee contends that this new way of envisioning the author changed the ownership of writing; it became “peculiarly and distinctively the product—and property—of the writer” because it exhibited his individuality.¹⁵ The author “as autonomous, original and expressive” were traits that differentiated this identity from “the writer, the scribbler, the journalist or literary drudge.”¹⁶

By creating a unique, individualistic identity, however, many Romantics faced an unreceptive public for their literary endeavors during their lifetime. The Romantics compensated for this by deferring recognition to future generations because their work transcended time and culture.¹⁷ This condition of Romantic genius is highly problematic. Foucault pushes back on the idea of Romantic genius by claiming that it is merely an “ideological product.” “In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion.”¹⁸ In a Foucauldian

¹⁴ Woodmansee, “The Genius,” 427. James L. W. West’s *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace Since 1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989) has a similar discussion on how American writers were “neither a profession or a trade” well into the twentieth century (7 and 20).

¹⁵ Ibid., 427. See also Woodmansee’s definition of author at the beginning of her essay “On the Author Effect: Recovering Collectivity,” in *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*, eds. Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jazi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 15.

¹⁶ Bennett, 56 and 60.

¹⁷ See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays*. Project Gutenberg eBook, 2004. Accessed March 20, 2017. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5428/5428-h/5428-h.htm>; Woodmansee, “The Genius,” 429; Bennett, 59; Hartley, 24.

¹⁸ Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 119.

move, he equates this interpretation of the author as a restriction, a way to close off meaning rather than open them up as the genius would imply. Similarly, Bennett asserts that another problem inherent problem with Romantic genius is the assertion that the author is outside of society. Because he or she creates products from the resources of the society and culture, the genius is “an unequivocally social being” and “always a fiction,” according to Bennett.¹⁹ The belief that Romantic geniuses were outside of the pulls of the marketplace is a romanticization to establish a higher privilege for literary and artistic production. That being said, the concept has persisted because it has become a way to distinguish one’s art from commercial products and instill a deeper meaning beyond profit. This tradition of Romantic authorship and the tensions it carried would become the a standard that writers would use over time to construct their authorial identities in both Europe and the United States.

American authorship took its foundations from Europe, especially England, but the writers and public developed their own interpretations of the author’s socio-cultural role. Americans were skeptical of the Romantic author because it represented “impracticality, tempermentality, effeminacy, immorality, and a feeling of superiority to ordinary mortals,” as Charvat describes.²⁰ He claims, “Like the poet, the tale writer felt himself to be a social deviate: from the point of view of the man of action, he was nonproductive, an idler.”²¹ The Romantic tradition of authorship represented all of the hedonistic values of Europe for many Americans, and writing, in general, was not seen as a way to make one’s way in the world. The gentleman amateur or man of letters did not publish to gain notoriety or profit. This author, according to

¹⁹ Bennett, 71.

²⁰ William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 66, *eBook Collection, EBSCOhost*, accessed February 4, 2018.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

James L.W. West, wrote because it was “something undertaken to amuse oneself and one’s friends.”²² The American author William Dean Howells began his famous essay “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business” with the proclamation, “A man’s art should be his privilege, when he has proven his fitness to exercise it, and has otherwise earned his daily bread; and its results should be free to all.”²³ Howells reinforced this romantic claim for genteel authorship by distancing the writer from the marketplace because “it debases the writer” to have his “personality” valued in such a way.²⁴ The man of letters/genteel author came to dominate American authorship for until the late-nineteenth-century.

Writers and other mediators attempted to change the perception of authorship in the U.S. by incorporating American work ethic and moral fortitude. If the Romantic tradition represented an aristocratic, feminine, and socially distant being, then the professional author was the *man* of the people. During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, writers created an image of authorship that mirrored the values of the American myth: a manly, technically proficient, hard-working individual tied to the land and its people. The traits rendered a democratic spirit in the cultural world.²⁵ Howells recast Romantic authorship by claiming, “the author is [...] merely a workingman, and is under the rule that governs the workingman’s life.”²⁶ American writers

²² James L.W. West, *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace Since 1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989): 10, accessed February 15, 2018, *ProQuest eBook Central*.

²³ William Dean Howells, *The Man of Letters as a Man of Business* (Project Gutenberg, 2008): sect. I, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/724/724-h/724-h.htm>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, sect. II.

²⁵ See Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985): xiv and 2. Wilson provides a clear definition of professional authorship in the third endnote on page 204.

²⁶ Howells, sect. XII.

during this time sought to counteract, as Christopher Wilson contends, “the ideas and literary fashions of aristocratic society.”²⁷ By professionalizing authorship, American writers would create a socially mobile identity that would encapsulate a democratic American experience.²⁸ This endeavor was not smooth and easily accepted, however. As West states, “there was no established training program to complete, no license to acquire in order to practice, no formal hierarchy of ranks or titles to pursue, and few clearly identified goals toward which to strive.”²⁹ The inability to group together cohesively showed the difficulty in breaking Romantic authorship’s association with individuality.

Authors’ appearances across media represents the struggle to define authorship in the U.S. Until recently, authors’ public images were primarily shaped in print. Visual media, such as photography, allowed authors to be seen by their audiences, which altered the image of the author in the late-nineteenth-century. These developments in self-presentation allowed writers to construct idealized images of their authorial identities. According to Lisa Kuitert, the author was no longer a faceless figure behind the work; the author could fully embrace the romantic ideal of immortality through two forms of media.³⁰ During the nineteenth century, the development of photography increased the visibility of the author in public, and photographs provided audiences with insight into the personalities behind their favorite works. Kuitert contends that author portraits “emphasized the subject’s role as a writer” and that “the author portrait makes the writer

²⁷ Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985): 5.

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

²⁹ West, 12.

³⁰ Lisa Kuitert, “The Author’s Image: Nineteenth-Century Conventions and Techniques in Author Portraits,” *Quaerendo* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 220, *Humanities International Complete, EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1163/157006907X244500.

more of a person, but on the other hand it also makes the person more of a writer.”³¹

Photography provided the visual medium to fix the author’s image in the public imagination alongside the image presented through print texts. This new visual image of the author became the de facto representation.

As new media developed over the past few decades, writers, critics, and readers have questioned the author’s and literature’s roles in our saturated media environment.³² Serious writers, who align themselves with literary tradition find a need to uphold the power and prestige of print against the onslaught of digital media. At the same time, emerging writers embrace new media to establish their authorial identities and a place within literary culture. Writers today must engage with the current media environment, and that engagement must be done through the prevailing conceptions of literary culture. Devaluing media other than print and disregarding the products of writers based solely on the medium of publication disconnects these traditionalists from the broader culture. Paradoxically, the writers who publish in and immerse themselves in digital culture feel constant pressure to conform to the literary standards or, as Foucault claims, “certain constants in the rules of author construction.”³³ conceptions for authorship and art. Digital writers are not seen as legitimate authors until they commit to print for their “major” works. This move does not invalidate their online presences, but it reinforces the prominent place print has in shaping conceptions of authorship.

³¹ Ibid. 224.

³² Finkelstein and McCleery, 118. Finkelstein and McCleery present the ongoing scholarly conversation about the book’s role in contemporary culture. Some critics argue that the book is dead (“the death of the book”), while others believe “we are living through a third cultural revolution in the shift from print to digital that combines textual, graphical, and oral materials.”

³³ Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 110.

Contemporary American authors exist in a contested space between the traditions of Romantic and professional authorship. This creates a uniquely American identity, one built on conflict and uneasiness. While many writers profess art's superior status, they also seek success in the literary marketplace and reach all segments of the public. The tensions are not easily resolved, and it is often evident in the author's public performance. Instead of creating a democratic authorship, the identities that come forth during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries straddle these historical lines, replicating the distance the American public has historically felt from high culture. Literary tradition affects all writers' authorial identities. This conflict between tradition and progress is significant to how we conceive of authors and authorship. Regardless of the Postmodernists decentering of the author or the narratologists' imposed textual limits of the implied author, the author as a cultural figure lives on in the digital age.

Directing the Action

The performance of authorship is defined by how writers present themselves to the public and how they are represented as authors within the literary world. These images are created and distributed through converging texts across multiple media, allowing brands to materialize around authorial identities. These brands link the author to literary traditions as well as ground them in commodity culture. This dual placement creates conflict between their acts, the media, and the literary marketplace. I believe this point of conflict in authors' identity performances highlights the surprising effects tradition and new media developments have had upon our perceptions of authorship.

Performance is a complex process of acting out the writer's authorial identity in public, and these acts are not solo features. For Foucault, the creation of an author is "a complex operation" that is not merely an act of individual agency, but a group effort from multiple social entities.³⁴ The author is then represented across media and becomes, in a Foucauldian sense, "the unifying principle in a particular group of writings or statements."³⁵ The author, for Foucault, "does not always play the same role" across "fields."³⁶ That means that a scientific writer performs authorship differently than a writer in literature. Although this may be the case, the author is "the solid and fundamental unit" of our interpretations of culture, according to Foucault, which has made the figure a constant presence that affects "the status or value" of literature.³⁷

Critics contend that authors are not individuals per se; they are socio-cultural constructions. Foucault contends that the author is "only a projection" of the reading process.³⁸ More importantly, Alexander Nehamas distinguishes between "the writer" and "the author" by asserting that authors are significantly different from the "actual individuals, firmly located in history," in other words, writers.³⁹ Nehamas models his ideas from Foucault and his, by now

³⁴ Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 110.

³⁵ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 221.

³⁶ Ibid., 221.

³⁷ Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 101 and 109.

³⁸ Ibid., 110. See also Alexander Nehamas, "What an Author Is," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 11 (1986): 686, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/2026619>. See also Hartley, "Authorship and the Narrative of the Self," 25.

³⁹ Alexander Nehamas, "What an Author Is," *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 11 (1986): 686, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/2026619>.

standard claim, that the author and “the real writer” are not the same, just like “the fictitious speaker” in a text is different from both.⁴⁰ Distinguishing between the writer and the author is significant when analyzing authorship as performance because we need to make a clear boundary between the living person and the media presence. I argue that the author is created through performance, both textually and visually, and is separate from the “real living writer.” The author is a character that creates a lasting impression outside of the works. This lasting impression equates the author with characteristics that are modeled on values of the time period but also on the values of beyond those of her or his natural lifetime.

One of the most famous authors of all time was constructed through, what Bennett notes about the Romantic author, “a back-formation or ‘retrojection.’”⁴¹ Shakespeare, as he is typically imagined, was not always *Shakespeare*. Rose contends Shakespeare was “invented,” becoming the epitome of Romantic genius.⁴² This individual created original works of art, and through this, established himself as unique from the masses.⁴³ According to Bennett, “In the Romantic period in particular, this notion of originality develops into the mantra of a poet being ahead of his time, into the idea that the true poet, the genius, is original to such an extent that he will necessarily be neglected in his own time and only fully appreciated in the future, after his death.”⁴⁴ Many social actors, even to this day, mythologize Shakespeare as a transcendent figure not bound by his or any time. This feature of authorship does not fade with the professional

⁴⁰ Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 112.

⁴¹ Bennett, 71.

⁴² Rose, 122.

⁴³ See Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759). See also William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

⁴⁴ Bennett, 59.

identity that developed in the latter half of the nineteenth-century. As writers pushed back on the marketplace over time, they returned to this Romantic type of authorship to validate their place in the literary world.

One feature of authorial performance that stems from this Romantic ideal is name signification. Authors are branded as both characters and products by their names. Foucault states, “The author’s name is not, therefore, just a proper name like the rest.”⁴⁵ The author’s name, in a Foucauldian sense, classifies discourse, “marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being.”⁴⁶ Although the name serves as an identifier, Foucault believes that it is not consistent because “modification[s]” or “significant change[s]” affect the author’s meanings.⁴⁷ He describes how if Shakespeare’s sonnets were not written by Shakespeare, it would drastically alter how his authorship is interpreted; however, he prefaces this example by showing that if the house attributed to Shakespeare was discovered not to be his, then it would have only a slight effect on the author’s name. Ultimately, Foucault’s brief analysis of the author’s name provides a glimpse into how meaning and brand identity is created. By establishing a limit on the texts and meanings grouped under an author, the author’s name serves as a stand-in for the entirety of the author’s presences in society and culture.

⁴⁵ Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 106. For other analyses of the author’s name see Hartley, 30; Juliet Gardiner, “‘What is an Author?’ Contemporary Publishing Discourse and the Author Figure,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (Spring, 2000): 67-70, <http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/docview/89065507?accountid=14780>; Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001); P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2014).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

The author's brand intersects with multiple areas of culture and collapses the romanticized distance between literature, celebrity, the marketplace, and technology. The author becomes, as Joe Moran believes, a representation of "both cultural capital and marketable commodity" through branding.⁴⁸ For Moran, the author signifies a romantic desire in our commercialized and technologized culture. This desire is "channeled into our representation of authors and artists, who *perform* the role of spiritually legitimizing society by virtue of their separateness from it."⁴⁹ Authors' presences across multiple media extend their identities beyond print, and by grounding their performances in tradition, they provide meaning to audiences. Contemporary authorial branding compares to the same features of contemporary celebrity. According to Richard Dyer, "The star both fulfills/incarnates the [social] type and, by virtue of her/his idiosyncrasies, individuates it."⁵⁰ P. David Marshall extends Dyer's claims by granting celebrities "ideological power" that is produced through a "combination of familiarity and extraordinariness."⁵¹ The author is both stranger and close friend, a figure that makes audiences feel at ease but also one that disrupts their expectations. The author's brand is used to identify her or him, but it also functions as a way to create a lasting image in the literary world.

To become a brand and, ultimately, a literary celebrity, though, writers must engage with both the literary marketplace and the media. The sociology of literature becomes a key frame for analyzing the performance of authorship at this intersection. For many critics, the "Author" and

⁴⁸ Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 6, accessed January 12, 2017, *ProQuest ebrary*. See also Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980* (New York: NYU Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9. (my emphasis)

⁵⁰ Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1998), 47.

⁵¹ P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2014), 86, accessed January 10, 2017, *ProQuest ebrary*.

literary culture contain unstable identities and meanings.⁵² These fluid roles allow writers to shift their authorial identities depending on their stature in literary culture. Bernard Lahire believes writers participate in the literary “game” through an “inner necessity,” and the ability to maintain one’s place within the literary world depends on the writer’s ability to achieve protection from “the most dramatic (commercial or literary) decline.”⁵³

Writers establish their authorial identities through collaboration with publishers, editors, academics, and other social actors. Not merely an act of individual agency, but a group effort to grant meaning, an individual becomes, according to Foucault, “a certain rational being that we call ‘author.’”⁵⁴ Foucault shows that this construction is motivated by our need to differentiate authors by granting them characteristics that separate them from the rest of society. Similarly, Bourdieu contends, “The invention of the writer and the artist...is the end result of a collective enterprise.”⁵⁵ One of the most prominent aspects of the branding of authors, for Bourdieu, is “the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to limit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer.”⁵⁶ Prominent writers, and to a

⁵² See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Jerome McGann, “The Socialization of Texts,” in *The Book History Reader*, 2nd ed, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2006): 66-73; Mary Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 40; Bernard Lahire and Gwendolyn Wells, “The Double Life of Writers,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 443-65, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/40983831>.

⁵³ Bernard Lahire and Gwendolyn Wells, “The Double Life of Writers,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 455-456, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/40983831>.

⁵⁴ Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 110.

⁵⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 162.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

larger extent publishers, who are largely outside the scope of my project, dictate the defining principles of the literary field. Through establishing and supporting these principles, authorial identities gain cultural prestige. Bourdieu argues that literary culture creates “value” as well as objects through the conflicts to establish definitions of authorship. Cultural figures participate in the battle between different groups to control these definitions.⁵⁷ This often manifests in, what Lahire calls, a “schizophrenic *double life* of the writer.”⁵⁸

The effects of literary tradition, especially the Romantic desire to be separate from commercial culture, and the drive for professional recognition clash within authorial identity performances. Bourdieu call this a “‘loser wins’” mentality, meaning that instead of seeking monetary gain many writers attempt to gain symbolic and cultural capital.⁵⁹ Bourdieu asserts that the “‘pure’ writer or artist” clashes with the market and its demand for consumable products.⁶⁰ The shift in the way art and literature were defined during the eighteenth-century lead to the tension between the “author” and the marketplace. According to Woodmansee, art possessed value within itself, making it reside in “a separate domain” from all other “human activities.”⁶¹ At the same time, these writers and artists wanted to sell their works to the public, and the values the public placed upon their works often clashed with the ones they had. This became a driving force in the creation of the “*intrinsic*” values of art, Woodmansee finds developing in eighteenth-

⁵⁷ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, 193-196.

⁵⁸ Lahire, 445. (emphasis in original)

⁵⁹ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 39.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶¹ Woodmansee, “The Interests in Disinterestedness,” 24-25.

century Germany.⁶² This development also affected how writers and artists viewed themselves in society and culture. They wanted to make clear that their identities were not dependent upon the whims of the public, and thus they sought to generate cultural over economic capital. However, writers need other mediators to recognize and support their authorial identities. For Bourdieu, the image of an author is formed through a process of “co-optation,” where the writer creates and publishes, and then the market integrates these products in “the process of circulation and consumption.”⁶³ The consumption process causes the Romantic writers to become further disillusioned with the literary marketplace, reinforcing their beliefs in literary art’s superiority.

As writers infuse the characteristics of disinterestedness into their authorial identities, they, also, act out their identities within the commercial media environment. This engagement with technology further brands authors. Media provide writers with an array of tools to participate in literary culture, yet this is not my area of primary concern. The digital age demands a certain form of authorial performance, one which both accepts and rejects literary tradition. The boundary between high literary culture and mainstream, popular culture has continually blurred over the course of the twentieth century, and the emergence of the Internet’s capabilities to further collapse these boundaries has shifted the author’s role.⁶⁴ Writers cannot remain solely

⁶² Ibid., 23. Throughout the article, Woodmansee traces the development of this interpretation of art by Moritz using his own writings on the subject.

⁶³ Bourdieu, 116-118.

⁶⁴ See J. David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print* (Mahwah, N.J.: Routledge, 2000), 205-208, accessed February 1, 2017, *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. See also Richard Grusin, “What Is an Electronic Author? Theory and the Technological Fallacy,” *Configurations* 2.3 (1994): 469-483, *Project Muse*, accessed April 7, 2016; Mark Poster, *What’s the Matter with the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Tatiani G. Rapatzikou, “Authorial Identity in the Era of Electronic Technologies,” in *Authorship in Context: From the Theoretical to the Material*, eds. Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Polina Mackay (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 145-162; Zoran Velagić and Damir Hasenay, “Understanding Textual Authorship in the Digital Environment: Lessons from

print based; their presences must be experienced across all media channels. Moran contends that “authors can no longer be seen as separate from their public images in a mediated world.”⁶⁵ This idea became prominent over the course of the twentieth-century, but it has gained even more momentum during the twenty-first-century. Moran claims this allows for “many different kinds of authors, including the less obviously ‘mainstream’, to be marketed as public personalities.”⁶⁶ If authors *appear* pleasing or *become* notorious through their actions, then they gain recognition through their media presences.

The media environment, from television to the Internet, offers new ways to perform authorship. Like other areas of culture, the literary world reverses the traditional values it once held. The desire for authorial images often surpasses the literary text, according to Louette and Roche.⁶⁷ Visual media allow writers and publishers to capitalize on this by shaping how the author appears. Visual and print media operate, according to Marshall, as “*representational media*,” which create a “*representational cultural regime*” that uses media to promote and “distill” celebrities into “the field of popular culture.”⁶⁸ These media provide identities with the

Historical Perspectives,” *Information Research: An International Electronic Journal*, vol. 18, no. 3 (September 2013): n. pag, accessed April 7, 2016, www.informationr.net/ir/18-3/colis/paperC19.html#.WAKZu5grL-Y.

⁶⁵ Moran, 74.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁷ Jean-François Louette and Roger-Yves Roche, “Portraits of the Contemporary Writer,” *Les Cahiers de Médiologie* 15 (2003): 59-66, accessed April 20, 2017, doi:10.3917/cdm.015.0059. See also Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 129.

⁶⁸ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, xxxii. For an in-depth analysis of television’s role as a representational media, see Marshall’s chapter—“Television’s Construction of the Celebrity” in *Celebrity and Power*, 119-149. See also Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: The New Press, 1998).

channels to flow, in Marshall's interpretation, from a controlled source to the audience. Traditionally, these images are closely associated with the literary text in the form of author portraits. According to Louette and Roche, "To make a portrait, for a writer, is often to seek a parallel between his texts and his image, to try to produce a mirror effect, to make the portrait consonant with the work."⁶⁹ They propose that author portraits have "two effects" on the consumption of the work and the author's identity: "specular consonance and problematic surprise." In this sense, portraits serve a significant purpose in the branding of the authorial identity through their support or disruption of prevailing expectations. Either way, author portraits offer a "degree of refinement," as Louette and Roche contend, "that the evolution of his portraits redoubles the evolution of his self-image [a]nd even the evolution of his image of his writing." How authors are presented through their visual images becomes a marker of their role/s. Similarly, how these images change or remain consistent over time reveals the level of cultural recognition the author holds.

One of the major tensions in authorial identity performance involves the shift in cultural value during the digital age. "[T]he value of printed vs. electronic matter" is an issue Tatiani Rapatzikou interprets as a development from the intersection of cultural values between the book and the Internet. Rapatzikou argues that "both the reader and the author are participants in the same process [in digital media]: observers as well as transcribers of the information posted on the web."⁷⁰ This removes some of the authority traditionally associated with authors. When everyone can be an author of their digital presences, do the traditional conceptions of authorship

⁶⁹ Louette and Roche.

⁷⁰ Tatiani G. Rapatzikou, "Authorial Identity in the Era of Electronic Technologies," in *Authorship in Context: From the Theoretical to the Material*, eds. Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Polina Mackay, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 158-159.

matter? It is this paradoxical question that undermines much of the cultural discussion around authorship in the digital age.⁷¹ The ideas expressed by Barthes and Foucault caused much of the contemporary focus to center on the reader. Barthes famous declaration, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author,” initiated a call for critics to turn away from the author as a source of meaning in texts and place their attention on the multiple meanings produced through the reader.⁷² The restriction of meanings is something Foucault takes on as well by claiming that the author should no longer be viewed as a limitation as it has historically been, but he also contends that “a system of constraint” would still exist, even though it “will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced.”⁷³ The “experience” is often considered to be filtered through the reader and the digital technology that has altered how we interact with “authored” texts. The high value placed upon the intimate knowledge of a writer makes the authorial identity become a stronger presence relative to the work. Even though he wants to remove the control over textual meaning from the author, Barthes claims, “*I desire the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation nor his projection), as he needs mine (except to ‘prattle’).*”⁷⁴ Barthes “desire” for the author means that the figure still holds some

⁷¹ Many critics see digital media as the culmination of the Postmodern “Death of the Author” Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida began in the late-1960s. See Poster, *What’s the Matter with the Internet*; and Hartley, “Authorship and the Narrative of the Self.” However, many find the digital age to offer a significant development in how we conceive of and study authorship. See Grusin, “What Is an Electronic Author?,” Ingo Berensmeyer, et al. “Introduction Authorship as Cultural Performance: New Perspectives in Authorship Studies,” *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, vol. 60, no. 1 (2012): 1–29, *De Gruyter Online Journals*, doi: 10.1515/zaa.2012.60.1.1; and Velagić and Hasenay, “Understanding Textual Authorship in the Digital Environment: Lessons from Historical Perspectives.”

⁷² Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 148.

⁷³ Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 119.

⁷⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 27.

psychological effect on the reader. Through this effect, the audience gains intimacy through their consumption of media images.

Instead of the distance older media engender, new media bring audiences directly to writers, causing them to constantly perform their authorship. The changing values of culture destabilize how social identities are constructed and consumed. Social media alter our interaction with celebrity images, according to Marshall. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms allow people to “follow” and be constantly connected to celebrities. This, for Marshall, is dramatically different than “a collection of images from print sources” and their ability to create “connection” because these new “*presentational media*” take the audience deeper into the lives and experiences of public figures. Marshall calls this feature of contemporary life “*new public intimacy*” to account for the blurring between the private-self and the public-self online media have initiated.⁷⁵ The desire for the author outside of the literary work ultimately mirrors what carte de visites began in the nineteenth-century. Social media remove the distance of older media and replace it with a faux-reality where audiences are privy to authors’ intimate moments and thoughts.

If authors’ identities are constructed both through and against literary history and media, how do we understand them as performances? Joseph Roach maintains that “[p]erformance implies a certain level of shared expectation about the way in which participants will behave, predisposing them to special efforts in the ways in which they will make use of the time and place of the event.”⁷⁶ Authors are expected to appear and act a certain way whether in a book or on Twitter. The public, including other writers, has been conditioned through representations of

⁷⁵ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, xi-xii and xxxiv.

⁷⁶ Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 127, accessed March 31, 2017, *ProQuest ebrary*.

authorship in media to associate certain traits with authors. Like gender identity being “instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” for Judith Butler, I contend that writers use repetition to perform authorial identity.⁷⁷ Butler claims in *Gender Trouble* that “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual” that culture upholds and understands.⁷⁸ For Butler, meaning is created through consistent repetition, while divergences result in signs of deviance.⁷⁹ In the same manner, the performance of authorial identity depends on consistencies between performances, and each performance, whether in print, visual, or digital media, needs to present some recognizable features of authorship to be deemed legitimate. Similarly, Erving Goffman professes that “a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated” must be maintained in order to create a believable and meaningful performance.⁸⁰ At the same time, Goffman asserts that certain factors exist within multiple sources that could “discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that the performance fosters.”⁸¹ Any attempts to move beyond these often ends with the performer, and in my case the writer, being depicted as inauthentic, a fake.

Through the efforts of various figures and entities, an authorial identity is legitimized. For Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens, and Marysa Demoor, “a complex model of authorship as

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal Theatre* 40, no. 4 (1988), 519, accessed January 11, 2017, doi:10.2307/3207893. (emphasis in original)

⁷⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999): xv.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁸⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), 75.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

cultural performance will have to include the performance of individual agents [the writers] as well as other ‘actants,’” such as editors, publishers, literary agents, critics, and journalists.⁸² This leads to casting the authorial identity as, what Meizoz calls, a posture.⁸³ The role of other mediators in the construction, distribution, and maintenance of the authorial identity gives way to the cultural significance the identity can gain or lose over time. Meizoz asserts, “The posture plays at the articulation of the individual and the collective” and that it “is generally exercised in relation to others (by imitation, opposition, parody, etc.).”⁸⁴ Through performance writers show the effects of literary tradition on their identities, and through cultural acceptance of these media performances their authorial identity is validated. However, Meizoz contends that the identity a writer creates and has disseminated through various media channels becomes “a dialogue ritualized by speech institutions that distribute roles (author, reader, mediators) and codify genres,” and he claims that “[t]here are fewer rules than regularities, for social actors to perform improvisations capable of disrupting routines.”⁸⁵ Like Butler and Goffman, Meizoz places posture within a cultural matrix, or as Berensmeyer, Buelens, and Demoor call “a cultural

⁸² Ingo Berensmeyer, et al. “Introduction Authorship as Cultural Performance: New Perspectives in Authorship Studies,” *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, vol. 60, no. 1 (2012): 9, *De Gruyter Online Journals*, doi: 10.1515/zaa.2012.60.1.1.

⁸³ See Meizoz, “Posture and Biography: *Semmelweis* de L.-F. Céline,” *COntEXTES* 3 (2008), accessed April 20, 2017, <http://contexts.revues.org/2633>; Meizoz, “Cendrars, Houellebecq: Portrait and Self-Presentation,” *COntEXTES* 14 (2014), accessed July 3, 2017, <http://contexts.revues.org/5908>; and Meizoz, “Writing Means Entering the Stage: Literature in Person,” *COntEXTES*, February 10, 2015, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://contexts.revues.org/6003>.

⁸⁴ Meizoz, “Posture and Biography.” A similar idea is developed in “Cendrars, Houellebecq.”

⁸⁵ Jérôme Meizoz, “Writing Means Entering the Stage: Literature in Person,” *COntEXTES*, February 10, 2015, accessed April 19, 2017, <http://contexts.revues.org/6003>.

topography” that involves not only literary culture, but also the intersections of multiple areas of social life.⁸⁶

Framing the Characters

An interdisciplinary framework informs this project. The combination of authorship studies, performance studies, celebrity/persona studies, and sociological studies of literature provides a wide base to engage with the varying ways authorial identity is represented across the literary world. Building off the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Butler, Goffman, and others, I approach authorship as a social identity affected by the intersections of history, art, and media. I work within a middle ground between total authorial intention and total removal of subjectivity. In my view, the author is a character that the writer performs in her or his media presences, and like all good characters, the author is dynamic, changing over time to meet the writer’s gains in status, celebrity, and/or wealth. These changes are also affected by the media the writer uses. Each medium has its own qualities and characteristics for presentation, and writers must work within them—to an extent—to produce believable performances that audiences consume.

The methodological and analytic choices stem from this framework. The primary methodology is qualitative. Close reading and textual analysis of authorial performances make up the main analytic structure, allowing for a deep engagement with a range of texts. These methodological choices uncover the patterns and divergences between authorial identity performances. There are limitations to such an approach, however. Filtering this through only one perspective reduces the multiple meanings contained within each performance act for the

⁸⁶ Berensmeyer, et. al, “Authorship as Cultural Performance.”

diverse audiences in the literary world. Reader-Response and other audience centered methods could further illuminate the intricacies of authorial performances for consumers, but for the purposes of this study, they move away from the primary goal of uncovering how writers construct and enact authorial identities through their media presences.

The writers used for this study are publicly visible across a range of media and publications, which combined with the interdisciplinary framework, greatly affects the archive and its materials. Since it is a study of contemporary authorship, the writers are still alive and working, except for one. This being the case, there is only one archived collection of papers, which did not contain the materials needed for such an endeavor; the other three writers have not received such treatment from the academic community. Unlike other analyses of literary culture, I do not include close readings of novels, short stories, or other standard literature. The only exceptions are nonfiction and print interviews. Established materials such as photographs and television programs are used to highlight certain aspects of the writers' authorial performances.

The archive for this project is mainly digital, and this feature presents both fruitful and problematic areas for scholarly research. Since the study does not focus on standard literary materials, how is an author's work defined? Foucault asks a similar question about the meaning of "the work."⁸⁷ He believes it lacks clear limits: "Even when an individual has been accepted as an author, we must still ask whether everything that he wrote, said, or left behind is part of his work. The problem is both theoretical and technical."⁸⁸ Does a tweet constitute a part of authors' works? Is the publisher produced web-video included? How does a researcher consider

⁸⁷ Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 103-104.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 103. Foucault has a similar discussion of the author's *oeuvre* in *Archeology of Knowledge*. He contends, "The oeuvre can be regarded neither as an immediate unity, nor as a certain unity, nor as a homogenous unity" (24).

Instagram? These questions are only some that came up while devising the digital archive for this project. I argue that these materials are part of authors' works because they are created and performed, just like the creation of a novel or other literature. These "works" are essential in analyzing the performance of authorial identity because they operate between reality and fiction; they are not total fabrications, but they are constructed to present a specific image. At the same time, these texts are ephemeral, whether through the writer's, the publication's, or the platform's intentions. This creates an access issue. The conscious removal of new media texts or the subscription-based model for many digital only publications presented challenges that needed to be overcome in order to fully access the most useful materials and calls attention to the peculiar challenges of researching such digital materials. One way of working around this was to utilize the resources of the *Internet Archive* for obtaining previous versions of websites.⁸⁹ Even though these issues and the fact that the Internet is continually growing each minute, these paratexts present a larger picture of the authorial performance outside of the traditional concepts of literature.

The chapters focus on individual writers who embody four types of authorial identity. These writers, also, represent different ways to respond to the media environment in which authorship is performed today. These four types are not impermeable since writers can adopt characteristics of each, nor are they meant to represent all possible types. They do provide insight into a few of the more traditional identities for literary fiction writers, however. The writers in this study serve as exemplars of the four types, and they hold some form of or potential

⁸⁹ This was not always fruitful. Some websites had different URLs or domain names, while some were never crawled, which limited the archive. Another difficulty was the loss that naturally occurred over time. The hypertext aspects were degraded when looking at websites from the early public Internet. Since my focus was more on the creations of the writers, this was not overly problematic unless they were linking to their own texts.

for cultural capital. The literary world in this project is defined through its literary quality, in a Bourdieuvian sense, meaning that the focus of this project centers on the performance of authorship in the more restricted areas of cultural production. This allows for the exclusion of other types of authorial identities and popular genre writers in favor of a detailed tracing of four prominent authorial identities across literary fiction. Looking specifically at these authorial identities provides me with the opportunity to trace how the history of authorship affects certain performances. How these authors attempt to place themselves within the literary world is significant because they adopt Romantic and professional traits but also desire to be viewed as beyond these types of authorship. The conflict these four writers experience when performing as authors reveals that literary culture demands some form of conformity to its dominant traditions, even though they feign rebellion.

Jonathan Franzen's authorial performance is analyzed in Chapter One. His authorial identity is built on conflict because throughout his career he casts himself as a professional artist. Franzen's reputation as, according to Susan Lerner, "arguably the best living American novelist" justifies how he is viewed by many in the literary world.⁹⁰ The image audiences receive is one of an author heavily indebted to literary traditions, but also one who knows the effects these have on his performances and their reception. Franzen's prominent position, especially after *The Corrections*, made him a literary celebrity and forced him to engage with the commodification of literary culture. He uses this to his advantage when enacting his "man of letters" identity. At the same time, he casts himself as a professional who earns his living through art. By performing as

⁹⁰ Jonathan Franzen, "A Conversation with Jonathan Franzen," by Susan Lerner, *Booth: A Journal*, February 13, 2015, accessed October 12, 2017, <http://booth.butler.edu/2015/02/13/a-conversation-with-jonathan-franzen/>.

an author who maintains literary tradition, Franzen draws attention toward himself and his works as living representations of literature's historical role as the pinnacle of cultural production.

Chapter Two builds upon the characteristics Franzen performs. David Foster Wallace is a contemporary embodiment of Romantic genius. His suicide in 2008 allowed for his image as a sacred genius to become the prevailing representation within the literary world. Lev Grossman described Wallace after his death as "America's No. 1 literary seed" and a "relentlessly generative genius."⁹¹ However, it was not only through death that he became this type of author. Early in his career, Wallace was compared to Postmodern luminaries and served as an example of high art's intrinsic complexity. These associations affected Wallace greatly, causing him to rebel and attempt to establish his own version of authorship. With *Infinite Jest*, he truly became the sacred genius, and he never fully deviated from this image for the remainder of his life, although certain visual images polished his appearance. Like Franzen, Wallace was skeptical of media and their role in the commodification process. Nevertheless, Wallace's role as a literary celebrity forced him to engage with the marketplace and its demands for the author. It was through these presences that he solidified the representation of him as a continuation of the Romantic genius.

Another romanticized authorial identity is the eccentric, played by Tao Lin. Lin represents a new way to begin one's performance of authorship. Instead of publishing in print like Franzen and Wallace at the start of his career, Lin adopted the Internet as his primary medium. He is a digitally born author who disrupts literary tradition early on, and this feature of his authorship makes him significant, even though his works do not have the same brand

⁹¹ Lev Grossman, "The Death of a Genius," *Time*, September 29, 2008: 63, accessed March 10, 2017, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost, <http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,cookie,uid&db=a9h&AN=34428431&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

recognition as Franzen or Wallace. Lin's use of digital media, ranging from his blog to numerous social media accounts to numerous appearances in e-zines, shows that writers are no longer beholden to the tradition of print publication to become a part of the literary world. However, digitally born authors, such as Lin, face a constant backlash from the establishment because of their association with less prestigious media for authorial performance. This, combined with Lin's consciously performed eccentricities to gain attention, makes him a target for the continued devaluing of the digital as a domain for serious authorship. Lin reveals the performative nature of authorship and the need for writers to actively distinguish themselves from others to become noticed by mainstream literary culture. Mainstream publications, reluctantly, accept Lin after the publication of his novel *Taipei* with Vintage Contemporaries, and through this acceptance by mainstream literary culture, Lin conforms to the prevailing traditions of authorship.

The final close reading focuses on Roxane Gay and her performance of an intersectional authorial identity. Gay is a significant figure because, like Lin, she begins her career as a digital author, but she quickly becomes a highly respected author and literary celebrity. Gender and race factor significantly into her authorial performances more so than in Franzen, Wallace, and Lin. Her identities as a Black woman affect how she engages with literary culture, but also how she engages with society as a whole. The intersections of gender, race, and art are further complicated by her embrace of digital media. She maintains an active and highly visible presence on Twitter, while her blog allows her to create without the constraints associated with more commercial forms of publication. Although she finds tremendous value in performing her authorial identity in new media, Gay desires the literary recognition she believes can only be achieved with print publication. She gains this with the success of her nonfiction essay collection *Bad Feminist*, ultimately becoming a notable public intellectual and literary celebrity. These

social identities merge with Gay's other identities to create tension in how she performs as an author. She, eventually, uses the position of "intersectional author" with its prominence and media visibility to fight inequality.

In Coda: The Author's Conflict in the Digital Age, I address some ways to develop a persona and performance studies analysis of authorship and literary culture. The lasting effects of Romanticism and professional conceptions of authorship cause writers to act according to embedded traits. I propose that through an interdisciplinary analysis we can reassess the author's role in the digital age. Taking a closer look at how authors perform traditionally and nontraditionally, as well as their specific engagement with a variety of media, can possibly uncover new versions of authorship that are not strictly bound to print, which could disrupt the privilege afforded to the performances in that medium. The authors presented in this study show four possible ways to interpret authorial performance and its use of multiple media. Furthering this type of frame to other areas of cultural production could illuminate the efforts other writers, artists, designers, intellectuals, and public figures use to create representations of themselves and their "intellectual" products.

Raising the Curtain

According to Lahire, a struggle exists in the "literary game."⁹² What is the struggle and the payoff for participating in this game? One answer is that writers seek to place their authorial identities within and against both literary tradition and the media of their time. These savvy performances use traditional authorial elements and media to present updated versions of

⁹² Lahire, 460.

authorship in the digital age that rarely stray from their historical antecedents. This inability to escape tradition and the reliance on print media as the dominant marker of authorship limits the recognition of many authorial identities within literary culture.

Digital media have expanded and complicated the ways authorial identities are performed. The continual development of digital technologies for self-presentation alter how writers approach not only creating literary works but also establishing their authorial identities, especially across social media platforms. Marshall distinguishes social media as “*presentational media*,” as opposed to the “*representational media*” of print and older visual media. The rise of “*presentational media*” shifts culture away from a “*representational cultural regime*” towards a “*presentational cultural regime*,” which emphasizes the individual’s role in self-presentation and social construction.⁹³ Unlike the linear sources of authorial images in print, film, and television, digital media offer direct and unilateral distribution. Audiences receive information from the author’s main social media accounts, their friends/followers, news and cultural outlets, and many other mediators.⁹⁴ This change in how we consume and create affects how writers approach digital media as a communication channel for their authorial performances.

This project aims to uncover how contemporary writers act as authors across multiple media by using an interdisciplinary frame that incorporates authorship, persona/celebrity, media, and sociological studies. By engaging with authorship in this manner, the varying ways literary tradition, media, and celebrity intersect will be brought to the forefront. These are only a few points of intersection; they are, however, some of the most prevalent and promising. Interpreting authorship as performance broadens a relatively restrictive and, in many ways, stagnant area,

⁹³ Marshall, xxxiv.

⁹⁴ Ibid., xxxiii.

adding nuance to how the literary world actively works to maintain and devalue one of its most prominent features.

Chapter 1

The Author as Professional Artist: Jonathan Franzen

“The writer’s life is a life of revisions...”

—Jonathan Franzen, “The Art of Fiction No. 207,” *The Paris Review* (2010)

“SINCE THE PUBLICATION of *The Corrections* in 2001, Jonathan Franzen has become — with the possible exception of Kanye West — the most bitched about artist in America.”

—Ira Wells, “Mr. Difficult Rejects His Title,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (Sept. 29, 2015)

“The only power that matters to me—and it matters a lot—is the power of writing. If the writing is weak, everything else is bullshit.”

—Jonathan Franzen, “Like a Fish in a Tweed Suit: Jonathan Franzen in Conversation with Manjula Martin,” interviewed by Manjula Martin, *Scratch: Writers, Money, and the Art of Making a Living*, ed. Manjula Martin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017): 264.

The words *elitist*, *pretentious*, *asshole* follow Jonathan Franzen, and it does not help he, often, embodies them. Other writers, such as Andre Dubus III, have referred to Franzen as “elitist.”⁹⁵ Journalists have critiqued Franzen’s views on social media and contemporary culture, while a Twitter hashtag, #Franzenfreude, was started by writer Jennifer Weiner to highlight the establishment’s love for white male authors.⁹⁶ As just a sample of the numerous attacks on his

⁹⁵ David Kirkpatrick, “‘Oprah’ Gaffe by Franzen Draws Ire and Sales,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 2001, accessed January 04, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/29/books/oprah-gaffe-by-franzen-draws-ire-and-sales.html>.

⁹⁶ See Maria Bustillos, “Jonathan Franzen, Come Join Us!,” *The New Yorker*, September 18, 2013 for a criticism of Franzen’s comments about Salman Rushdie and other authors’ use of Twitter. See Lynn Neary, “Feminist ‘Franzenfreude’ Over Raves for *Freedom*,” *NPR*, August 30, 2010. #Franzenfreude is still used on Twitter, and an entire Tumblr (*Franzenfreude* [<http://franzenfreude.tumblr.com/>]) collects memes and other digital takedowns of Franzen.

authorial identity, it is clear Jonathan Franzen holds a contentious place in the literary world. However, these criticisms reveal an important aspect that is often overlooked, and that is Franzen's acceptance of these traits as part of his authorial identity. He believes people label him like this "[b]ecause I tell the truth; people don't like the truth."⁹⁷ This "telling it like it is" mentality definitely rubs people the wrong way, but it also makes him a writer who is unafraid to figuratively push against the status-quo. His belief that audiences should receive "[i]ntellectual pleasure, emotional pleasure, linguistic pleasure, [and] aesthetic pleasure" from literature causes his authorial identity to straddle serious literature and popular entertainment.⁹⁸ It is not enough to be a bestselling and award-winning author; Jonathan Franzen wants to be the professional artist par excellence.

Early in his career, Franzen embodied the conflict between high art and popular art. His media appearances fluctuated between aspirations toward serious authorship and desires to reach a wide audience. He emerged with *The Twenty-Seventh City* in 1988, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG), a prestige publishing house. The company attests to having authors who have won "numerous National Book Awards, Pulitzer Prizes, and twenty-two Nobel Prizes in literature" in their catalogue. Many of the writers who have published or currently publish their works with FSG are considered literary and cultural icons: T.S. Eliot, Hermann Hesse, Susan Sontag, Elisabeth Bishop, Pablo Neruda, Joseph Brodsky, Flannery O'Connor, and Roberto Bolaño are but a few of the iconic authors published under the Farrar, Straus and Giroux

⁹⁷ Lucy Kellaway, "Lunch with the FT: Jonathan Franzen," *Financial Times*, October 9, 2015, accessed January 03, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/6a563a5a-6cde-11e5-8171-ba1968cf791a>.

⁹⁸ Stephen J. Burn, "Jonathan Franzen, The Art of Fiction No. 207," *The Paris Review*, no. 195 (2010), accessed January 09, 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6054/jonathan-franzen-the-art-of-fiction-no-207-jonathan-franzen>.

emblem.⁹⁹ FSG's cultural capital works "to consecrate," in a Bourdieuvian sense, Franzen as a member of "highbrow" literature.¹⁰⁰ In their promotional material, FSG labeled him a "literary author first" and touted *The Twenty Seventh City* as "'one of the most spectacular debuts by an American writer in recent memory.'"¹⁰¹ Casting Franzen "solidly in the high art literary tradition" established his representation as a man of letters.¹⁰² Aligning him with highbrow literature distanced him from writing as a commodity. This marketing tactic required Franzen to act out the traditions associated with this type of authorship. At the same time, his desire to be viewed as a democratic author clashed with the Romantic traits he often invoked.

In this chapter, I analyze Franzen's authorial identity as it appears across multiple media platforms and within a range of media texts: nonfiction, interviews, television, photographs, websites and social media, and other paratexts. After the publication of *The Corrections*, Franzen gained literary celebrity, which complicated his performance of the author as professional artist. He had to adapt to the effects of celebrity and the shifting perceptions toward his brand. Other mediators and Franzen problematize his performances, revealing the conflict between serious art

⁹⁹ "About Farrar, Straus and Giroux," Macmillan Publishers, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://us.macmillan.com/fsg/about#About>.

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randall Johnson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 39-42. Bourdieu contends that "the field of restricted production" operates in opposition of "the field of large-scale production [la grande production]." In the field of restricted production, "producers [authors, artists, publishers, etc.] produce for other producers," whereas in the field of large-scale production, objects are made for mass, popular consumption (39).

¹⁰¹ Boris Kachka, *Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar, Straus and Giroux* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 293.

¹⁰² Jeff Baker, "Oprah's Stamp of Approval Rubs Writer in Conflicted Ways," *The Oregonian* (Portland, OR), October 12, 2001, 05, accessed January 09, 2017, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/0EF2C08E45866470?p=AWNB>.

and the literary marketplace. Print, visual, and digital media become tools to construct and deconstruct his authorial identity later on. Ultimately, Franzen performs as a professional artist who seeks to represent himself through literary creation. His habitual enactments of the traditional values of Romantic and professional authorship against the desires for marketable authorial identities counteracts many of his attempts to champion literary culture. Through his authorial identity, Franzen represents the turmoil American writers have faced historically, and still struggle with today, when performing authorship.

Romanticizing Print

Franzen's performance as a professional artist began with the publication of his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*. At this time, he imagined himself a Postmodernist. Authors like Pynchon, DeLillo, and Gaddis provided him with a blueprint, and he constructed an authorial identity to highlight societal "urges and anxieties."¹⁰³ Franzen believed art was more important than the author's persona.¹⁰⁴ Using this idea as a starting point, he published "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels," a critical take on literary culture's role in the media environment of 1996. Alongside his discussion of how literature provided a nuanced view of society and culture, Franzen addressed the commodification of authorship. He

¹⁰³ Donald Antrim, and Jonathan Franzen, "Jonathan Franzen," *BOMB*, no. 77 (2001): 74, accessed January 17, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/40426619>.

¹⁰⁴ Jonathan Franzen, *How to Be Alone* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 86-87. This essay, entitled "Why Bother?," originally appeared as "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels," in *Harper's* (April 1996). There are revisions appearing in "Why Bother?" that do not appear in "Perchance to Dream." Franzen revised and retitled the essay for the 2002 publication of this essay collection. I will utilize both essays in my analysis to show how Franzen attempts to shift his authorial identity through authorial control.

admitted to experiencing “the torment that many young novelists feel at the pressure to market the innately private experience of reading by means of a public persona—on book tours, on radio talk shows, on Barnes & Noble shopping bags and coffee mugs.”¹⁰⁵ The distaste for the marketplace affected his authorial identity greatly. Franzen took issue with the friction between being a serious artist and a celebrity: “I’d already realized that the money, the hype, the limo ride to a *Vogue* shoot weren’t simply fringe benefits. They were the main prize, the consolation for no longer mattering to a culture.”¹⁰⁶ American writers have never experienced the same social status as their European counterparts, and with the influx of newer public personalities, namely film, music, and sports celebrities, only diminished it. Franzen found solace in literature but this “higher” form of culture did not alleviate his sense of losing recognition: “Yet even while I was being saved as a reader...I was succumbing, as a novelist, to despair about the possibility of connecting the personal and the social.”¹⁰⁷ By being cast by his publisher and contemporaries as a serious artist, Franzen acted out a deeply romantic view of authors and their role in America, and this view added to his conflict.

Franzen’s language in “Perchance to Dream” alluded to traditions of authorship and consuming literature: “Solitary work—the work of writing, the work of reading—is the essence of fiction.”¹⁰⁸ The movement of writing and reading practices away from oral performance to

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan Franzen, “Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels,” *Harper’s*, April 1996, 50, accessed January 12, 2017, <http://archive.harpers.org/1996/04/pdf/HarpersMagazine-1996-04-0007955.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJXATU3VRJAAA66RA&Expires=1484240635&Signature=Jg0QtgEach3nlivC4sMy2GdTCs0%3D>.

¹⁰⁶ Franzen, *How to Be Alone*, 61.

¹⁰⁷ Franzen, *How to Be Alone*, 58.

¹⁰⁸ Franzen, “Perchance to Dream,” 41.

literate performance, culminating in the mass audiences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, triggered this notion of writing and reading as individual activities. These led to the belief that print reconstituted the voice of the author to the reader. Franzen valued the autonomy.¹⁰⁹ Referencing the character Otto Brentwood from Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters*, Franzen found Otto's ability to stay firm against technology's encroachment into literary life consoling: "Otto Brentwood, if he existed in the Nineties, would not break down, because the world would no longer even bear on him. As an unashamed elitist, an avatar of the printed word, and a genuinely solitary man, he belonged to a species so endangered as to be all but irrelevant in an age of electronic democracy. For centuries, ink in the form of the printed novel has fixed discrete, subjective individuals within significant narratives."¹¹⁰ Otto reflected Franzen's own views toward electronic media, and he found Otto's elitism beneficial in the late-twentieth-century. Like Otto, Franzen became "an avatar of the printed word," a character concerned with literary value.

Although he wanted to be cast as a serious artist, Franzen did not explicitly claim that identity in the *Harper's* version of the essay. He revised the piece and his authorial performance for the collection *How to Be Alone* in 2003, adopting the professional artist identity. Writing in "Why Bother?," Franzen described himself as a "social novelist who desires to represent the world not simply in its detail but in its essence."¹¹¹ He questioned the social novel's ability to inform society. Even though he critiqued the social novel as a genre, Franzen found value in the professional identity that authors such as Dickens, London, James and Bellow portrayed. He

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 86.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

¹¹¹ Franzen, *How to Be Alone*, 72-73. This passage does not appear in "Perchance to Dream."

believed, “The novelist has more and more to say to readers who have less and less time to read.”¹¹² No longer dominated by one communicative medium, our media saturated culture must be highly selective, but for Franzen, the author performs a significant social role that cannot be replicated in these communications. He recounted how Dickens and his contemporaries used the novel and print, in general, to critique and instruct Victorian society.¹¹³ He contended that the novel functioned for nineteenth-century culture as “the preeminent medium of social instruction” and that new works by prominent professionals of the time were met with a “kind of fever.”¹¹⁴ The novel, according to Franzen, served dual purposes: it was a form of entertainment, but also a form of education. The writers who mastered these techniques became essential cultural figures, gaining large audiences and recognition.

The audience’s desire for works by these professional authors established a form of literary celebrity, but one that was not based upon a form of “human emptiness,” as Boorstin argued.¹¹⁵ Boorstin separates how authors and artists are romanticized because they provide value to society, not, what he calls, “pseudo events:” “Our idolized writers are esoteric. [...] Our great artists battle on a landscape we cannot chart, with weapons we do not comprehend, against adversaries we find unreal.”¹¹⁶ Franzen’s allusion to the power of authors to instruct society makes them of the people, figures seeking change for the betterment of all.

¹¹² Franzen, *How to Be Alone*, 65.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹⁴ Franzen, “Perchance to Dream,” 41.

¹¹⁵ Daniel Boorstin, “From Hero to Celebrity,” in *The Celebrity Culture Reader*, ed. P. David Marshall, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 74.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

Franzen's desire to be a professional artist manifests within "Perchance to Dream." He discussed how the academy had become a safe-haven for authors who did not want to "rough it out" in society.¹¹⁷ Franzen's language separated his type of authorship from those of his contemporaries who write from within the university. "[R]ough it out" implies that the professional's life is difficult; one must survive in a harsh, competitive world. It criticizes the romanticized academe offers writers—a consistent paycheck, time, and cultural capital. Franzen reveals his thoughts about university-sponsored literature, while illuminating how he interprets his authorship by stating, "I rationalized my own gut aversion to the university with the idea that a novelist has a responsibility to stay close to life in the mainstream, to walk the streets, rub shoulders with the teeming masses, etc."¹¹⁸ He concluded that he "enjoy[s] living within subway distance of Wall Street and keeping close tabs on the country's shadow government."¹¹⁹ Placing himself within the social milieu, Franzen connects his authorship to other great professional authors, especially Dickens.¹²⁰ Like Dickens's ventures into London at night for ideas, Franzen needed to move within society, unlike the cloistered existence of academy writers. The key word Franzen uses is "mainstream." The author as professional artist is not averse to the marketplace and the public; Franzen is one of them, much like Dickens wanted to still be the boy experiencing London and a successful businessman.

¹¹⁷ Franzen, "Perchance to Dream," 48.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹²⁰ See Charles Dickens, "Night Walks," in *The Uncommercial Traveler* (London, 1905; Project Gutenberg, 2015), 102, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/914/914-h/914-h.htm#page102>.

However, Franzen could not distance himself from the Romantic tradition because he suffered for his art. This suffering initiated a “tragic perspective” in his performance.¹²¹ His language attempted to replicate the professional discourse around authorship of the late-nineteenth-century through showing he writes from within society, not outside of it, and his authorship is accessible to all because of this. Like everyday individuals, Jonathan Franzen, the author, schleps around like the rest of us. At the same time, his suffering for his art was a Romantic hallmark. Living by the whims of the market led to Franzen to become disillusioned and retreat into a staunch defense of literature’s prestige. His identity moved between Romantic and professional conceptions of authorship, making him aspire for the acclaim many Romantics craved, while at the same time rejecting their distance from true democratic authorship.

At this stage in the development of his authorial identity, Franzen relied on the cultural capital of print publications. Describing how “the cultural businessman” has just as much, if not more, of a role in creating value in cultural objects and artistic personae, Bourdieu asserts that this mediator has the power to “invest his prestige” in artists he believes represent the prevailing values of cultural production.¹²² Through publishing his novels and nonfiction collections at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Franzen gains cultural capital based on their prestige. Also, by publishing “Perchance to Dream” in *Harper’s*, he positions his authorial identity alongside its prestige gained through being “the oldest general-interest monthly in America,” and the magazine’s association with professional authors like Mark Twain and Henry James.¹²³ Associating one’s authorship and work with the right publisher is essential because, as Bourdieu

¹²¹ Franzen, *How to Be Alone*, 93.

¹²² Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 76-77.

¹²³ “About *Harper’s Magazine*,” Harper’s Magazine Foundation, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://harpers.org/history/>.

states, “a corresponding *natural site*” allows for the artist’s and work’s success.¹²⁴ These choices exhibited Franzen’s agency in the construction of his image. He actively sought out two publishers who held cultural prestige that would provide avenues for recognition as a professional artist.

Franzen’s need for control over his representations in public became stronger as his literary celebrity developed. With the publication of his third novel, *The Corrections* (2001), he gained a level of renown that complicated his performance. He won the National Book Award for fiction, and the novel was a surprise bestseller. During this whirlwind of recognition, Franzen reinforced the Romantic side of his authorial identity by adamantly claiming his desire to be outside of the literary marketplace. Through his promotional interviews and essays in publications ranging from *The New York Times* to more local/regional papers, Franzen encountered the lingering conflict between the author and the demands of the market.

The author sitting at a desk working image proliferates in literary culture. Society spreads this in all media, equating it with an author “father[ing]” books, granting them life and supplying them meaning through isolation.¹²⁵ Franzen is no exception to the representation of the author as an isolated individual in this manner.¹²⁶ In a 2001 *New York Times* article entitled “Jonathan Franzen’s Big Book,” Emily Eakin romanticized Franzen’s writing studio during the composition of *The Corrections*:

¹²⁴ Ibid., 95.

¹²⁵ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 144. Although women authors are shown at their desks, the traditionally male image dominates much of the popular imagination around authors at work.

¹²⁶ See figure 1: Chris Buck, photographer, “The Jonathan Franzen Award for Jaw-Dropping Literary Genius Goes to...Jonathan Franzen,” *GQ*, December 3, 2010, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://www.gq.com/story/jonathan-franzen-profile-chuck-klosterman-freedom>.

Some days Jonathan Franzen wrote in the dark. He did so in a spartan studio on 125th Street in East Harlem, behind soundproof walls and a window of double-paned glass. The blinds were drawn. The lights were off. And Franzen, hunched over his keyboard in a scavenged chair held together with duct tape wore earplugs, earmuffs and a blindfold. ...

For Franzen, this is the imagination's price, the arduous means by which he conjures a fictional world and reproduces it on the page.¹²⁷

The description contains some Proustian lore embedded in Franzen's dedication to solitariness.¹²⁸ His art requires no distractions, to essentially remove himself from culture to create. This is a performative act. Franzen's intentional isolation and Eakin's romantic description make the writing studio a hallowed space. Eakin co-authors with Franzen an image of his authorship as "weird."¹²⁹ She clarified this by calling him "a man consumed" by his art.¹³⁰ The conflict between being accepted as one of the people and being a transcendent author forces this description. Franzen is at once of and not of mainstream culture. Romantic authors, like Byron, Shelley, and Baudelaire, and Realist authors, such as Dickens and Twain, provide a glimpse at this type of historical trait. These figures lay the foundation for some of the traditions that are embedded into authorial performances, with Eakin and Franzen continuing the practice.

¹²⁷ Emily Eakin, "Jonathan Franzen's Big Book," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, September 02, 2001, accessed January 12, 2017, <http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/92083744?accountid=14780>. See also Jonathan Franzen, trans., *The Kraus Project: Essays by Karl Kraus* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013): 301. In footnote five, Franzen described how the romantic idea of authorial separation persisted within his and other authors' writing routines: "I use noise-cancelling headphones when it's loud at my office, and, for me, e-mail and digital voice mail are vital tools in restricting and managing the flood of communication that modern technology has unleashed."

¹²⁸ There has been much research on Proust and his writing habits, which is out of the scope of my project. For an insightful short article that touches on the recreation of Proust's bedroom/writing space from first-hand accounts, see Sadie Stein, "La Sagesse de Femmes," *The Paris Review*, March 15, 2016, accessed January 12, 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/03/15/la-sagesse-des-femmes/>.

¹²⁹ Eakin.

¹³⁰ Ibid.



Fig. 1: Franzen at his desk, Chris Buck, photographer, “The Jonathan Franzen Award for Jaw-Dropping Literary Genius Goes to...Jonathan Franzen,” *GQ*, December 3, 2010, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://www.gq.com/story/jonathan-franzen-profile-chuck-klosterman-freedom>.

In this manner, Franzen taps into “the writer’s life” trope.¹³¹ Eakin defined this as “an existence that was once fairly common,” but in contemporary culture “it seems almost eccentric.” This type of authorship romanticizes “harrowing amounts of discipline and despair—but drastic social deprivation as well.”¹³² Casting Franzen as an author who suffered for his art through isolation, Eakin seconded Franzen’s own performative statements. Even though a common thread existed between them, Eakin countered Franzen. She brought to the surface the Romantic idea that “[i]f authors were not higher than angels, they were evidently not greatly lower and plainly were superior to most of humankind.”¹³³ For Eakin and other critics, Franzen’s authorial identity distances itself from society to achieve the highest qualities of literary art possible, and the writing space becomes a physical manifestation of that.

However, in an interview with fellow author Donald Antrim in *BOMB*, Franzen is represented in a different vein. *BOMB* has been publishing since 1981 when its founders, a group

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Rose, *Authors and Owners*, 107.

of New York City artists and authors, created the publication to counteract the “disparity between the way artists talked about their work among themselves and the way critics described it.”¹³⁴ The candidness between Franzen and Antrim in this interview supports the publication’s mission statement. Franzen is open about his authorship and interpretations of art, as opposed to the more guarded responses he gives mainstream publications. Franzen claimed he was “uncomfortable with the idea that suffering creates material for art,” and that he was just “a man who writes novels.”¹³⁵ These declarations reveal the conflict present in Franzen’s performances. Eakin’s romanticized view of Franzen’s authorial identity was in direct conflict with what he expressed to an audience of peers. His openness about his desire to be seen as only an author of novels and not as a struggling artist was seconded by one of his contemporaries and close friends. In Eakin’s article, David Foster Wallace contradicted Eakin’s claim that Franzen was a representative of the Romantic tradition: “It would be easy to cast him as the ink-stained wretch who lives in an oubliette and comes out blinking into the sunshine every once in a while, [...] But Jon finds contact with humans nourishing.”¹³⁶ Wallace’s comment revealed an intriguing tension present in Franzen’s media presences: the act of being a professional artist differed depending on his audience.

Claiming a true Franzen is revealed in Wallace’s statement and Antrim’s interview is difficult, but because these two men are friends and fellow writers, Franzen’s performance is pulled back. Because Eakin’s article was published in the *New York Times* as opposed to *BOMB*, Franzen “adopt[ed] a social face” or what Goffman clarifies as “the projection of a constant

¹³⁴ “About *BOMB*,” *BOMB*, accessed February 2, 2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/about/>.

¹³⁵ Antrim, 75.

¹³⁶ Eakin.

image.”¹³⁷ According to Goffman’s interpretation of social performance, people maintain aspects of their identity through a consistent representation before audiences.¹³⁸ The consistent image Franzen and his co-authors use in more commercial publications, like the *New York Times* and *Harper’s*, provides a general audience the familiar Romantic tradition of authorship. Although he may waver, the consistent image is of an author who is both Romantic genius and social instructor. This becomes what Goffman calls a “front,” meaning “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.”¹³⁹ Consequently, the *BOMB* interview and Wallace’s statement reveal, what Goffman calls, the ““back region”” where the performance ceases.¹⁴⁰ Since Wallace and Antrim know Franzen personally, they have insight into his identity behind the media curtain, and since *BOMB* is published for artists by artists, it frees Franzen from strictly maintaining his performance. He can relax his social front, allowing an audience of peers to understand his authorial identity better. These sides of Franzen’s authorship and the forms of capital they generate clash after the widespread acclaim for *The Corrections*.

The Corrections earned Franzen the recognition he craved; however, these accolades came with a caveat. While the novel was considered “a work of art” by many critics, it also became a bestseller, gaining Franzen a more popular audience.¹⁴¹ The tension between art and popularity became a defining part of his authorial performances from this point forward. On the

¹³⁷ Goffman, 8.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 112.

¹⁴¹ Antrim, 72.

one hand, he still aspired to maintain the serious image that had been associated with his authorship since his first novel. On the other hand, a larger audience finally justified Franzen's "ambitious" nature and his professional belief that entertainment and art could be mutually beneficial to each other and society.¹⁴² Stephen Burn contends that "deeply imprinted on his [Franzen's] DNA as a novelist" is the discord "between literary elitism and popular appeal."¹⁴³ These warring sides were reinforced through his performative acts referencing his place in the literary world during the promotion of *The Corrections*.

One episode that truly defined Franzen's image occurred when Oprah Winfrey selected *The Corrections* as part of her book club. On her show, Oprah praised *The Corrections* as "[a] work of art and sheer genius" and called it "the great American novel."¹⁴⁴ This was high praise for a relatively unknown author. Although Oprah validated him and his work, Franzen regarded it as not true literary recognition. In an interview with *The Oregonian*, he commented on how he believed there was a reciprocal benefit for Oprah, FSG, and him with this selection. He viewed Oprah's cultural capital increasing by including his book in her book club, while increased sales and attention benefited FSG and him.¹⁴⁵ Franzen found opportunities in this reward, but he contended that the selection "heightens this sense of split that I feel. I feel like I'm in the high art literary tradition, but I like to read entertaining books and this maybe helps bridge that gap, but it also heightens these feelings of being misunderstood."¹⁴⁶ Franzen alludes to the division between

¹⁴² Eakin.

¹⁴³ Stephen J. Burn, *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 46.

¹⁴⁴ Kachka, 300.

¹⁴⁵ Baker.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

his intended audience and Oprah's intended audience, but also he alludes to the decrease in his status as a serious author through association with an unsophisticated, popular daytime television program.

He continued to criticize Oprah during the promotional tour for the novel, which reinforced the developing representation of him as an elitist. In an interview in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, Franzen claimed the "Oprah selection will probably not sit well with the writers I hang out with and the readers who have been my core audience."¹⁴⁷ Franzen clarified how this disrupted the rapport he had established with his intended audience: "These are people who tend to feel somewhat alienated from the mainstream, which is why they read instead of watch TV. So, they tend to have a suspicion of anything with a mainstream stamp of approval. My chief worry now is that I will lose readers that I'm interested in attracting."¹⁴⁸ His "worry" revolved around losing his cultural status more so than acquiring a larger audience and more money. The pompousness and elitism behind this made Franzen a divisive figure. His comment about being in the "high art literary tradition" revealed his desire to remain separate from the market. Serious authors, for Franzen, remained outside of popular entertainment. Even though he dealt with this in "Perchance to Dream" in 1996, Franzen had not yet experienced mass success, only critical and peer recognition. With *The Corrections*, he became a literary celebrity who must confront the commercial side of authorship.

Franzen resists the overt marketing of authorial identity, which makes him resemble a traditional man of letters. He worked against being labeled an elitist as early as 1996 in

¹⁴⁷ John Marshall, "Suddenly, Into the Heat of the Light," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (WA), October 06, 2001: E1, accessed January 09, 2017, <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/0EF05C48DD3694AE?p=AWN>.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

“Perchance to Dream,” where he wrote, “I resist...the notion of literature as a higher calling, because elitism doesn’t sit well with my American nature.”¹⁴⁹ This declaration functions performatively. Elitist is politically charged, implying a differentiation from the general public typically through a heightened sense of wealth, education, or cultural capital. Franzen distances himself from this label because he views the professional author as a representative of the people. The professional must write from a close proximity to everyday life in order to accurately depict it, not the privileged space of the man of letters. He exerts agency over his authorial identity and tries to circumvent this tradition of authorship, and he believes his identity and his performative language rejects elitism when it actually reveals an author willing to embody the tensions of literary history.

The Oprah’s Book Club spat provided Franzen with the opportunity to represent his authorship as outside commercial culture, and thus a representative of independent art. One of the main aspects of the Oprah episode that has been discussed across publications is that the animosity occurred over the label indicating the book as an Oprah’s Book Club selection. As with all picks, the novel would receive a signifying seal of inclusion.¹⁵⁰ Franzen explained to Jeff Baker how Oprah’s logo contrasted with how he wanted his authorship imagined: “It’s not a sticker, it’s part of the cover. [...] They redo the whole cover. You can’t take it off. I know it says Oprah’s Book Club but it’s an implied endorsement, both for me and for her. The reason I got into this business is because I’m an independent writer, and I didn’t want that corporate logo

¹⁴⁹ Franzen, “Perchance to Dream,” 45. This appears verbatim in the revised “Why Bother?” in *How to Be Alone* on page 74.

¹⁵⁰ See figure 2. Lynn Buckley, and Willinger/FPG, jacket design and photograph, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

on my book.”¹⁵¹ He dredges up the historical divide between popular and high culture, as well as the individualism historically associated with authorship. Franzen gains a permanent place in serious literary culture with *The Corrections*, and this prestige will be tarnished through the “implied” meanings of the Oprah seal.

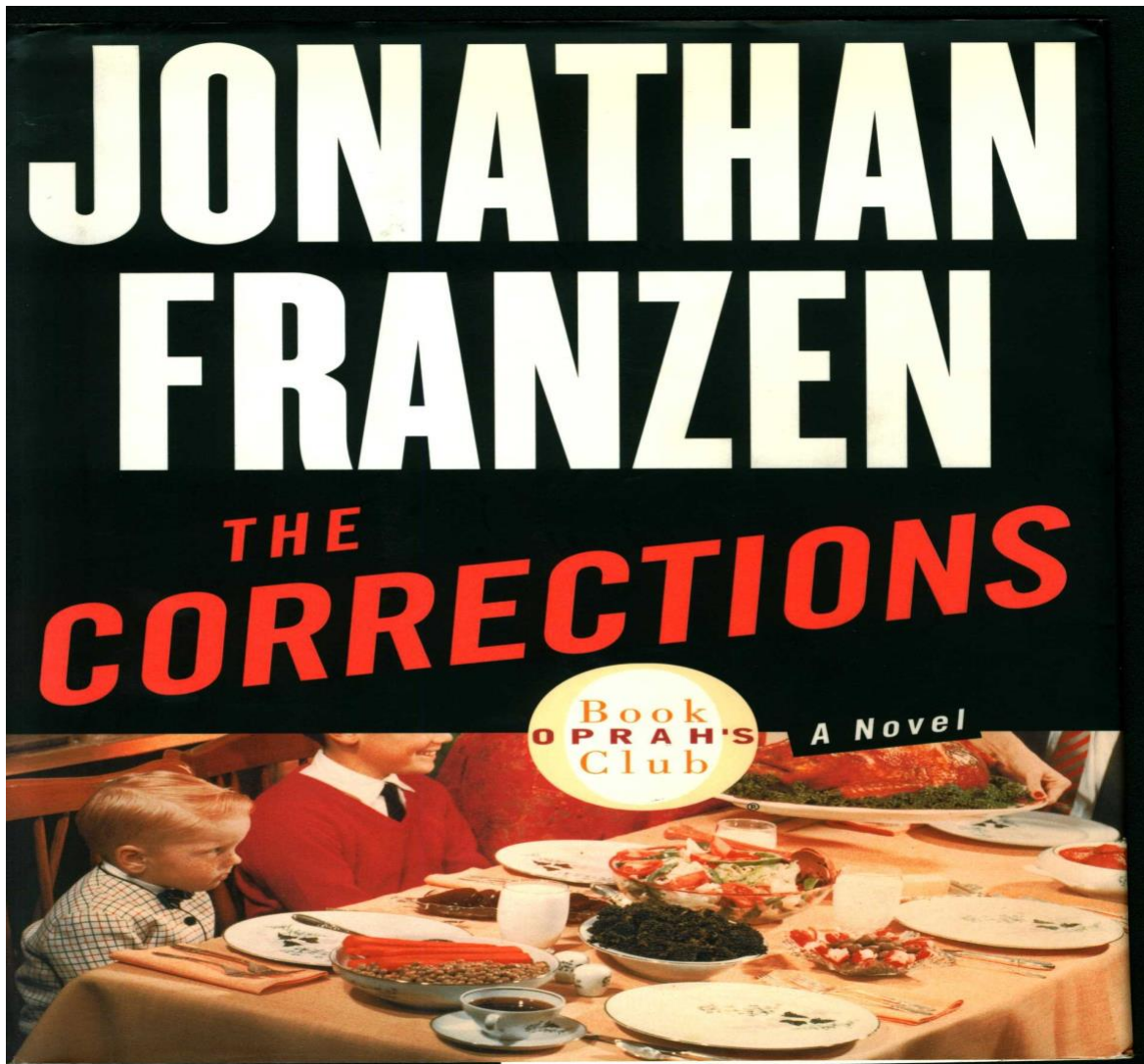


Fig. 2: Front cover, Lynn Buckley, and Willinger/FPG, jacket design and photograph, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

¹⁵¹ Baker. It is worth noting here again that Franzen’s works are published by FSG, a mainstream large-scale publisher. Irony exists behind Franzen’s claim of independence. A corporate logo appears in the form of FSG’s logo on each book. See David Kirkpatrick, “Oprah’s Gaffe...” *New York Times*, October 28, 2001. In the article, Kirkpatrick quotes Rick Moody’s comments on Franzen’s hypocrisy regarding corporate logos.

The cover adds another layer to this conflict beyond the Oprah's Book Club logo. The back contains blurbs from writers David Foster Wallace, Don DeLillo, Michael Cunningham, and Pat Conroy.¹⁵² In contrast to the front cover where Oprah's seal marks Franzen's place in popular entertainment, the back romanticizes him. Each blurbed the novel as brilliant and Franzen as a significant literary figure. It can be assumed Franzen had no objection to the "endorsements" of these men because they represent similar literary values. These writers lend cultural capital to Franzen, performing an act of "consecration."¹⁵³

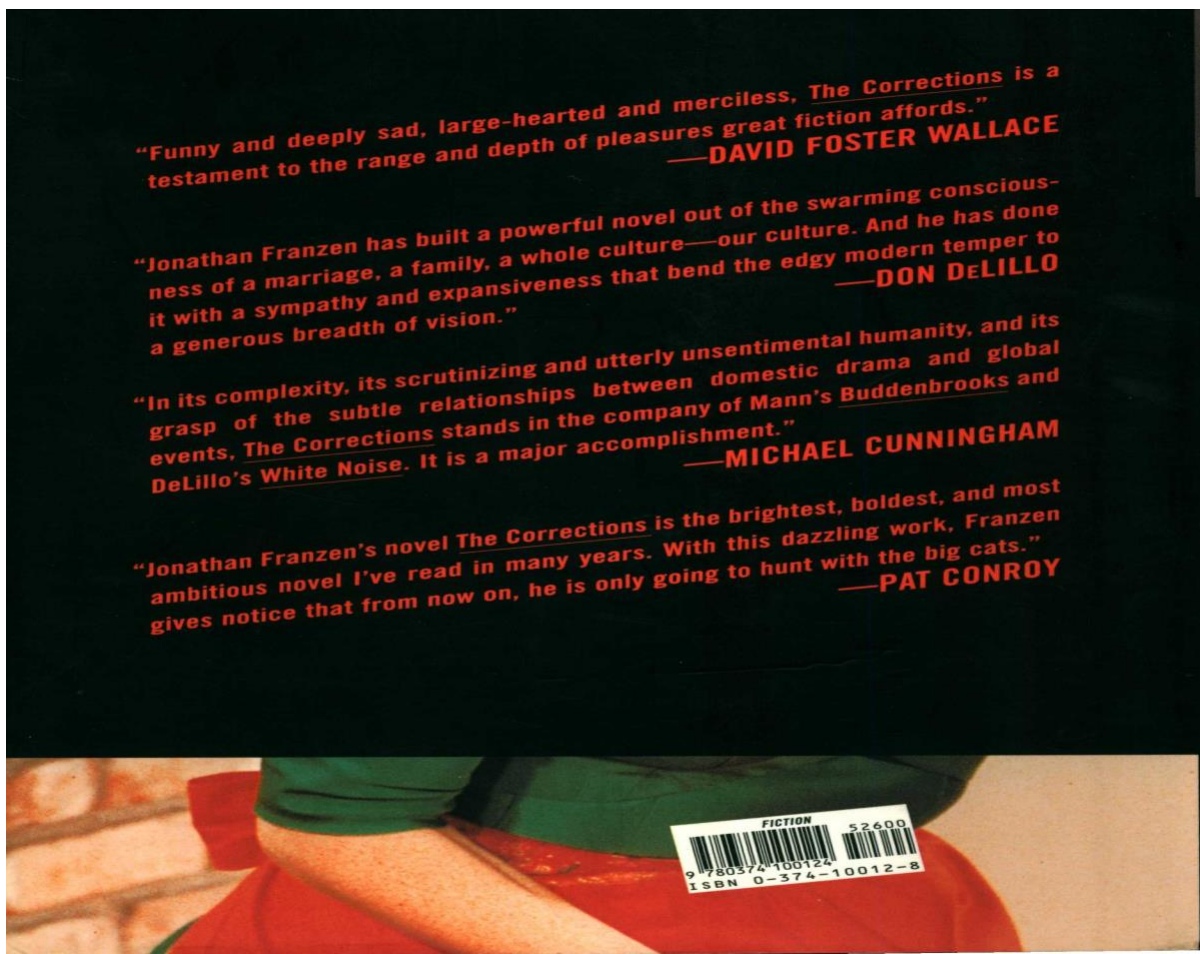


Fig. 3: Back cover, Lynn Buckley, and Willinger/FPG, jacket design and photograph, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

¹⁵² See figure 3. Lynn Buckley, and Willinger/FPG, jacket design and photograph, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

¹⁵³ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 75.

Franzen sought this type of endorsement from peers, and it becomes evident in his interviews coinciding with the Oprah Book Club selection. Stephen Burn calls Franzen a “two-dimensional cartoon figure” during “the Oprah affair.”¹⁵⁴ However, what emerges is a character that is aware of merging cultural boundaries. No longer is an author able to retreat into the safe confines of high art and wait for cultural prestige. The Oprah incident issued a warning to Franzen about his performances as a professional artist. His authorial identity relies on Romanticism, professionalism, and print, but he begins to recognize the power other media have in constructing and performing authorship for contemporary audiences. After this episode, he reluctantly performs as a literary celebrity—the author’s name and image sell books just as much as the art. He is, according to Philip Weinstein, “ambitious enough and ego-driven enough” to become “a leader in [his] field,” which involved performing beyond the medium of print.¹⁵⁵

In the next section, Franzen’s visual images are analyzed to reveal his embrace of duality. As his literary celebrity grew, he had to incorporate visual media appearances into his authorial performance. Photographs of him appearing alongside profiles in prestigious publications continued print media’s romanticization of his authorship. Television, also, becomes an essential medium for Franzen up through the publication of his latest novel *Purity* in 2016. These appearances were carefully selected to represent the intellectual side of the medium, instead of the popular entertainment he associated with Oprah. Franzen exhibits media savviness and a willingness to satirize himself in visual media. The act of seeing him physically perform shows that he is conscious of the power these media have in the literary world, and through his acts, he reinforces the dual nature of his identity as a professional artist.

¹⁵⁴ Burn, *Jonathan Franzen*, x.

¹⁵⁵ Philip Weinstein, *Jonathan Franzen: The Comedy of Rage* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 176.

Visualizing Duality

Although *The Corrections* became a bestseller because of Franzen's ability to craft a novel that was both artistic and entertaining, the Oprah controversy ushered him into another realm of mediated performance. Print's loss of dominance over the last half of the twentieth century and first two decades of the twenty-first century established an environment that privileged visual images. The solitary author acting only within prestigious print publications is problematized by this. The visual demands upon writers becomes more pronounced with the rise in literary celebrity, and Franzen had to face this new demand head on. By being perceived as "uncomfortable and conflicted" about his selection and appearance on Oprah's show as well as over other visual representations, Franzen battled with the reconfigured performance of authorial identity.

Two photographs represent Franzen's dual identities around *The Corrections*. The first image is from *The New Yorker*'s "The Future of American Fiction" from June 21, 1999.¹⁵⁶ Franzen was pictured with four other American writers, who *The New Yorker* claimed would be or should be considered the top literary authors of the new millennium. Along with Franzen, authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, David Foster Wallace, Michael Chabon, and Junot Díaz did emerge as leading figures in American literature. By being selected for this list, Franzen and these authors gained cultural capital from *The New Yorker*'s history as an arbiter of elite culture.

The issue was published three years after Franzen's "Perchance to Dream" and two years before *The Corrections*, so the photograph caught Franzen during an off-stage moment in the performance of the author as professional artist. As Eakin noted, Franzen had become "a literary

¹⁵⁶ See figure 4. Chris Callis, photographer, "The Future of American Fiction," *The New Yorker* June 21, 1999. Franzen appears on the right side of the photograph.

major leaguer from whom one could expect great things” after the publication of “Perchance to Dream,” yet he still operated within the limited world of serious literature until *The Corrections*.¹⁵⁷ Proclaiming these authors the future attached a form of celebrity to their names: they were the ones to watch, but more importantly they were young and intelligent. Franzen’s appearance alongside his peers smiling and having what appears to be fun while placed under the banner of “The Future of American Fiction” provides him and his art significant visual validation.

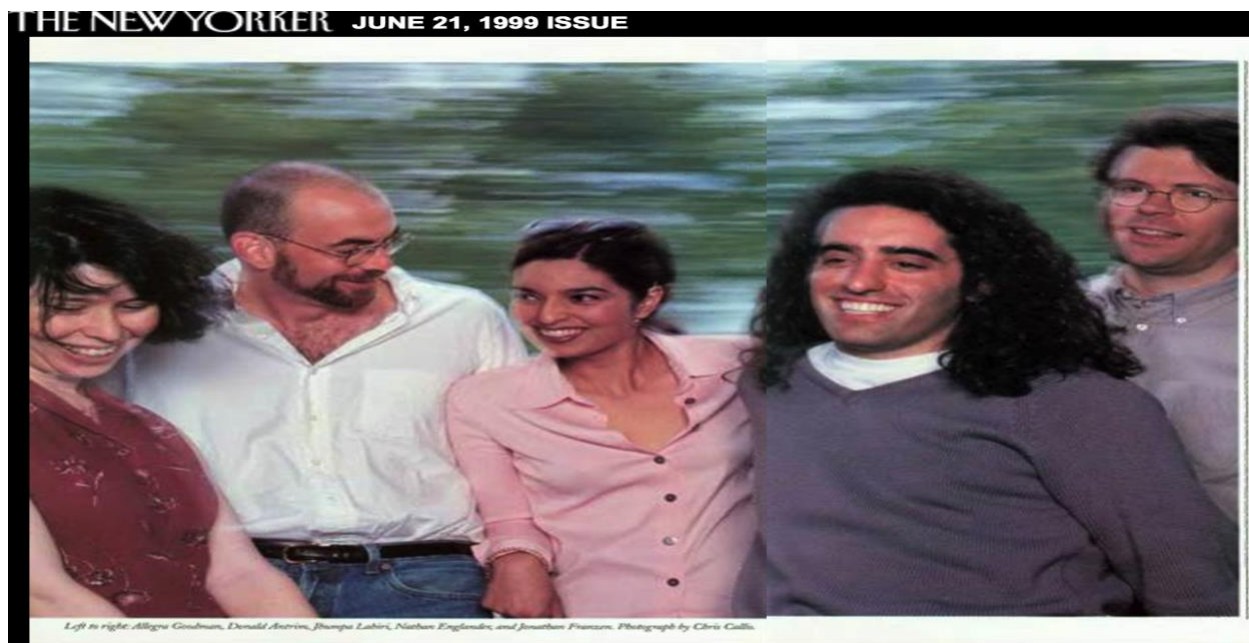


Fig. 4: “The Future of American Fiction,” Chris Callis, photographer, *The New Yorker* June 21, 1999.

The second image is the portrait on *The Corrections*.¹⁵⁸ *The New Yorker* photograph and this image contrast significantly. While *The New Yorker* showed Franzen smiling and enjoying the experience, the portrait depicted him as the brooding male author. The black-and-white color

¹⁵⁷ Eakin.

¹⁵⁸ See figure 5. Greg Martin, photographer, image from dust jacket of *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

palette and pose made Franzen appear highly serious. His face was angled, and his mouth was pursed. These two features implied that Franzen was an intellectual. The enjoyment of *The New Yorker* photograph was replaced with seriousness in the portrait, revealing an author who wanted his art and his image to be seen as professional.

The portrait performed another function for Franzen's authorial identity, however. It and the novel worked together to place his image within the literary imagination. Greg Martin, the photographer, played on Franzen's duality. On one hand, Franzen was represented as a serious author, while on the other hand, he came off as a handsome actor. The portrait participated in celebrity culture's fascination with beauty and appearance. By shooting him in this way, Martin allowed Franzen's face to become a selling point for his art. It branded Franzen as a specific individual and type of author, yet the print branding of him as elitist after his rebuttal of Oprah complicated this. He needed to act out his authorial identity within visual media in order to possibly counteract the prevailing image emerging in the literary world.

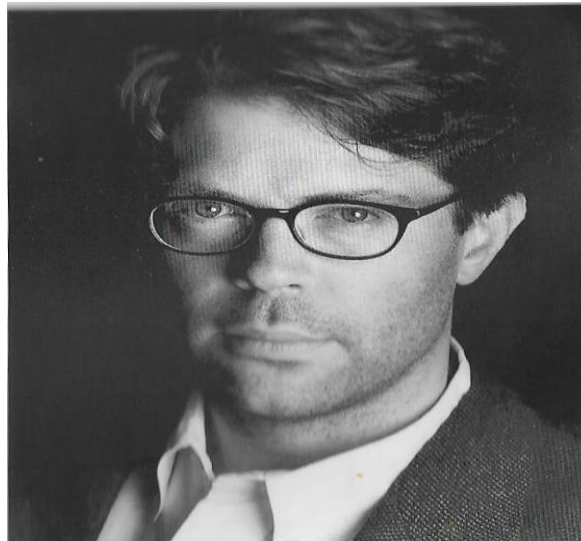


Fig 5: Author photograph, Greg Martin, photographer, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

Television provided him with a chance at redemption. By appearing in the medium he scorned, he could remove some of the negativity around him. Televisual Franzen is a conscious

performance; it is one that is tailored to the medium. Kachka describes how after Oprah rescinded her offer for him to appear on her show, FSG provided Franzen with an opportunity to become comfortable with television: “In advance of Franzen’s appearances on the *Today* show and *Charlie Rose*, he [Jeff Seroy, FSG’s marketing chief] hired a media coach—typically a \$5,000 expense. Over two long sessions, Joyce Newman broke down the author’s defenses and taught him to love the idiot box.”¹⁵⁹ FSG’s investment in his ability to perform visually reveals their interest in a successful presentation of his authorship. Since the success of their efforts to establish him as a professional artist, FSG needed Franzen to exhibit “the potential for commercial crossover” they noticed in him.¹⁶⁰ Through FSG’s help, his television performances extend his identity as a professional artist, but also reinforced his elitism.

Charlie Rose provided Franzen an opportunity to maintain his place in literary culture while venturing into television. Rose’s interview show held more prestige than *The Oprah Winfrey Show* because it appeared on PBS stations and focused on literary, political, and socio-cultural issues. Charlie Rose’s position, at the time, as a respected and award-winning journalist added to the show’s catering to an intellectual audience, as opposed to the general and primarily female audience of Oprah. As an interviewer, Rose romanticized Franzen’s authorial identity during his appearances on the show, much like the blurbs on *The Corrections*.¹⁶¹ Unlike other

¹⁵⁹ Kachka, 303. *Today* is notable because it borders the serious and light entertainment. Franzen’s willingness to appear on this show as opposed to *The Oprah Winfrey Show* possibly stems from *Today*’s history as a prestigious morning new program. However, the current version of *Today* could be comparable to Oprah’s.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁶¹ Franzen has appeared on *Charlie Rose* three times. His first appearance was on the episode “Future of American Fiction” that aired on May 17, 1996. Franzen, David Foster Wallace, and Mark Leyner were the guests. This interview coincided with the publication of “Perchance to Dream” in *Harper’s*. In this chapter, I focus on Franzen’s two solo appearances on *Charlie Rose*.

television programs, *Charlie Rose* was not overly commercialized, and although he appeared to promote his new novel, Franzen and Rose used deep discussion to cast the book as art instead of as a commodity.

At the same time, Franzen's budding literary celebrity affected the appearance. Rose noted several times Franzen had received the National Book Award for fiction. This placed emphasis on his success and the prestige associated with such awards. Franzen's prestige was contrasted with the discussion of his notoriety gained by criticizing Oprah. Rose mentioned the "media frenzy" that occurred "when he [Franzen] expressed hesitation about being selected by Oprah Winfrey's Book Club."¹⁶² The image of Franzen as an elitist marked all of his media presences regardless of their platform. Since Rose's audience might have or might not have been familiar with Franzen or his art, Rose relied on the gossipy nature of popular media to contrast the image of the award-winning serious author. Oprah resurfaced toward the end of the interview as a way for Rose to force Franzen to engage with this part of his authorial performance. Franzen awkwardly laughed and smiled, stating that it was "pleasant" to not talk about it. His shifting demeanor at this moment reinforced his discomfort with the medium of television. He claimed the whole ordeal was a form of misrepresentation because his statements and attitude toward Oprah were taken out of context by the media.

The difference between how popular television audiences and literary audiences affected an author was the main factor in Franzen's discomfort with Oprah. He was disoriented by "the bright lights" of success and that Oprah and he were "an uneasy fit." He alluded to the collapse of the private and public spheres for the literary celebrity, and he lacked experience dealing with the pressures associated with stardom, which resulted in his critical comments. Franzen believed

¹⁶² Charlie Rose, "Jonathan Franzen," *CharlieRose.com*, 29:39. November 21, 2001, accessed January 23, 2017, <https://charlierose.com/videos/19970>.

that “it’s a very strange thing to suddenly jump from...Kafka and Conrad into...selling a million books in a few months territory. And that’s a weird disjunction for the writer.” His mentioning of Kafka and Conrad further marks his authorial identity. These Modernists represent two areas of the literary world. Both are recognized as literary greats by academics, critics, and writers; however, Kafka’s aesthetics, lack of success while alive, and early death romanticize him, while Conrad’s popularity and literary fame during his lifetime places him as a professional. Franzen uses them to highlight the lack of monetary success many authors experience, but he points toward posthumous cultural recognition as a defining factor of literary greatness, as well. Alluding to the difference between these traditions of authorship, Franzen associates himself with the tensions writers often feel when entering the literary marketplace. His identity as a serious author clashes with sudden success and celebrity, something he told Rose was not in his “nature.” He claimed that writing “doesn’t serve any social end beyond entertaining people.” This statement is striking because it functions as an antithesis to Franzen’s performance of the author as professional artist.

Ironically, he maintained his stance that authors were different than other cultural figures during this appearance on *Charlie Rose*. He blamed the differences in identities for his discomfort and tensions with appearing on Oprah’s show. Rightfully, he called Oprah a “media personality,” which made her savvy of the media’s inner workings, and this became the “whole problem,” according to Franzen, because he, on the other hand, was “a writer.” Authors are relics, while television hosts are figures of the moment. Franzen suggested that a “discomfort of TV” and the requirements of that medium were what drove him to feel uncomfortable about Oprah. He seemed to have no problem appearing on Rose’s show, which could have stemmed from the coaching FSG provided. However, a more significant factor was that *Charlie Rose*’s

audience was one Franzen valued. He could overcome mere “discomfort” to present himself and his art there because he would be taken seriously. In a similar performance, his interviews and appearances in publications such as *Bomb* suggested he valued an artistic and intellectual audience over a more general audience. Franzen’s performances in these publications are open and revealing, while his other performances guard against revealing too much about the author.

Through consistent repetition of traits, Franzen’s identity as a professional artist takes shape. After his appearance on *Charlie Rose* in November 2001, he returned a year later to promote his essay collection *How to Be Alone*. Unlike his previous appearance, Franzen was guarded and wary of being the center of attention. Also, Rose appeared less accepting of Franzen’s act. When Rose praised *The Corrections* and his National Book Award, the camera caught Franzen rolling his eyes. Once he noticed the camera, he quickly adjusted his facial expression, momentarily glancing at the camera while scrunching his brow.¹⁶³ His actions and body language foreground his discomfort with the attention that has become a part of his authorship now. The pressure to perform to the standards set by others does not match his idea of being an author.

The deconstruction of his prevailing image became a constant feature of Franzen’s visual presences. One way this was achieved was through animated satire. *The Simpsons* gave Franzen the platform to satirize his authorial identity and literary culture more generally. The distance created between the actual individual and the character represented on the screen in *The Simpsons* allowed him to retreat further into his performance. In the 2006 episode “Moe ‘n’ a Lisa,” he appeared at the Wordloaf Writer’s Conference, a satirical take on the prestigious Bread

¹⁶³ Charlie Rose, “Jonathan Franzen,” CharlieRose.com, 15:05, October 30, 2002, accessed January 25, 2017, <https://charlierose.com/videos/666>.

Loaf Writer's Conference.¹⁶⁴ The animators illustrated Franzen's key features in *The Simpsons*' style, while allowing for them to accurately represent his image: dark frame glasses; shaggy, disheveled hair; and dark clothing. Besides this accurate representation, Franzen voiced his character, blurring the lines even more by actively participating in the construction and deconstruction of authorial identity during his character's scenes. The replication of his traits causes the audience to associate the animated Franzen with the person Franzen and with the author Franzen. The actions and speech of the animated Franzen breakdown the image of the serious author present in other media. During a panel discussion in the episode, an audience member asked the panelists—Tom Wolfe, Michael Chabon, and Franzen—who were their influences. Chabon responded by praising Franzen and *The Corrections*. Franzen replied, "Well, in turn, I'd have to say my biggest influence is [he paused here] Albert Camus."¹⁶⁵ He emphasized *Camus*, while leaning closer to Chabon. Chabon was distraught and exclaimed, "I blurbed you!" Franzen's response disrupted his perception as an author unconcerned with the literary marketplace's fascination with sales and personae: "Yeah, and it looks real sweet on my dust jacket." He held up a copy of *The Corrections* as he said this, and afterward teased Chabon by asking, "How do you like me now?"

His character spoke and acted superior to Chabon's character during the episode. Ultimately, they brawled after Franzen declared Chabon did not have the imagination to create a scene like Moe and Lisa's reconciliation at the end of the episode. Like the *Charlie Rose* interviews and print works where he attempted to present his authorial identity as a professional

¹⁶⁴ See figure 6. *The Simpsons*, "Moe 'n' a Lisa," Simpsonsworld.com, 22:06. 2006, accessed January 25, 2017, <http://www.simpsonsworld.com/video/307167299594>.

¹⁶⁵ *The Simpsons*, "Moe 'n' a Lisa," Simpsonsworld.com, 22:06, 2006, accessed January 25, 2017, <http://www.simpsonsworld.com/video/307167299594>.

artist, Franzen's character in *The Simpsons* played off of popular representations of him as an elitist, yet the fight removed the gentility associated with this figure. Instead, it reinforced the rugged manliness often associated with professional authors such as Hemingway and Mailer, but the brawl could not have been less stereotypically manly: they battle over validating each other's artistry. The way Franzen uses satire to deconstruct his images highlights the silliness that often underlies pomposity in the literary world.



Fig. 6: Animated Franzen, *The Simpsons*, "Moe 'n' a Lisa," Simpsonsworld.com, 22:06, 2006, accessed January 25, 2017, <http://www.simpsonsworld.com/video/307167299594>.

Along these same lines, *The Simpsons* version of Franzen critiqued the contentious nature of authorship, publication, and publicity. Celebrity and the marketplace affect how Franzen's character comes off to the viewer. The tone of his speech was elitist, but his language revealed his desire for recognition and monetary gain. The writers of the episode accurately represented the tensions present in Franzen's authorial identity, and at the same time, they created a safe space for him to poke fun at these tensions. The pretentiousness of Franzen becomes the main joke yet does not destroy the prevailing image.

The tension between satire and serious authorship emerge as another conflict in Franzen's visual performances. After his comedic turn on *The Simpsons*, he resurfaced in 2010 with the novel *Freedom*. At this juncture in his career, he was a literary star and his works were reviewed in all prestigious publications. He was no longer forced to play two separate roles; he could embrace the nuances of his authorship. This newfound comfort with the tensions between the traditions of Romantic and professional authorship showed that Franzen had settled into a consistent performance.

As with all his new novels, *Freedom* featured an updated author portrait.¹⁶⁶ Franzen appeared in casual attire, but instead of a highly staged portrait like on *The Corrections*, this picture captured him in action. The background of trees was blurred to foreground his image, which was a snapshot, a brief glimpse of him moving in the “natural” world. Martin's photograph played off the novel and the author's participation in environmental politics. Part of *Freedom*'s plot centers on environmentalism and the destruction of a bird habitat via mountaintop removal. Casting him in this way in the author photograph could have been an intentional choice by Franzen and Martin to reference these aspects of the novel, as well as Franzen's involvement with bird watching and his love of nature. Whether or not there was a conscious link between the photograph and the themes expressed in the novel and the author's activism, it revealed him embracing a more “natural” image.

¹⁶⁶ See figure 7. Greg Martin, photographer, image from dust jacket of *Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).



Fig. 7: Author photograph, Greg Martin, photographer, *Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).

The “natural” traits of Franzen’s *Freedom* portrait were disrupted by his appearance in *Time*.¹⁶⁷ The August 12, 2010 issue presented him as “The Great American Novelist” and featured a classical portrait on the cover. This was striking because it presented a highly Romanticized image of Franzen. The title, “The Great American Novelist,” anointed his authorship as the epitome of American literature. Capturing him in this manner reinforced how Franzen was imagined by many within the literary world—the great author maintaining his serious vision. The *Time* cover glorified Franzen’s identity as a professional artist by combining the visual representation with a gushing celebrity profile.

The accompanying profile by Lev Grossman, a peer, justified the cover portrait. At the beginning of the article, Grossman described Franzen’s characteristics:

Franzen is a member of another perennially threatened species, the American literary novelist. But he’s not as cool about it.... He’s a physically solid guy, 6 ft. 2 in., with significant shoulders, but his posture is not so much hunched as flinched. At 50..., Franzen is pleasantly boyish-looking, with permanently tousled hair. But his hair is now heavily salted, and there are crow’s-feet behind his thick-framed nerd glasses.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ See figure 8: Dan Winters, photographer, cover image of *Time*, August 12, 2010, accessed January 25, 2017, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20100823,00.html>.

¹⁶⁸ Lev Grossman, “Jonathan Franzen: Great American Novelist,” *Time*, August 12, 2010, accessed January 09, 2017, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2010185,00.html>.

Grossman consecrated Franzen's identity as "The Great American" author and presented him to *Time*'s wide, general audience as the contemporary author who matters the most. Franzen's *Time* image appears, as Philip Weinstein believes, "vaguely all-American," and that he "has the look of a serious (even severe) man."¹⁶⁹ Weinstein's assessment supports Grossman's description. The portrait shows *Time*'s audience that Franzen is to be taken seriously because he looks like an author, but more importantly, he resembles a great man. Grossman's focus on Franzen's body—build, height, and age—contextualizes him with the features of great leaders. As well, Weinstein's belief that Franzen is "all-American" reinforces American society's image of what literary figures should look like, a middle-aged white male concerned about his country's culture.

The cover portrait shows Franzen's charisma. Max Weber defines charisma as a form of public recognition of an individual's "exemplary" stature. This casts the individual "as a leader."¹⁷⁰ Franzen's image and the descriptions offered by Grossman and Weinstein construct inner and outer postures through visual representation, which Franzen reinforced in the profile: "I began with an ambitious wish to be a writer of a certain stature, and to be mentioned in the company of such and such, and to produce a certain kind of masterful book that engages with contemporary culture and all that."¹⁷¹ Seconding this revelation, Grossman posited that Franzen differentiated his authorship from his peers through greater ambition.¹⁷² Revealing his desire for greatness mirrors Weber's claim that "[c]harisma knows only inner determination and inner

¹⁶⁹ Weinstein, 1.

¹⁷⁰ Max Weber, "The Nature of Charismatic Authority and Its Routinization," in *The Celebrity Culture Reader*, ed. P. David Marshall, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 61.

¹⁷¹ Burn, "Jonathan Franzen, The Art of Fiction No. 207."

¹⁷² Grossman.

restraint.”¹⁷³ The *Time* portrait captured Franzen at his most authorial. He is celebrated like other great authors. Grossman extended this image by associating Franzen’s authorship with other literary greats such as Dickens and Tolstoy.¹⁷⁴ In this manner, Franzen inherited the prestige of revered professional authors, thus giving legitimacy to his performance.

The portrait is an atypical feature for *Time* at this juncture in the publication’s run. Contemporary *Time* covers have gone to politicians, business-people, or objects more than artists. However, Franzen’s appearance harkens back to earlier covers and the attempt to make literature a feature of democratic society in America. Burn notes that Franzen is “the first writer in a decade to appear on the cover.”¹⁷⁵ He is correct in his assertion, but a difference needs to be made between Franzen and other authors who have appeared on the cover. James Joyce and John Updike’s two appearances are the most by any authors, but other literary figures such as Nabokov, Salinger, and Morrison have graced the magazine’s front.¹⁷⁶ These serious authors are distinct from other authors, such as Stephen King, because they are more closely associated with the values of highbrow culture, as opposed to popular culture like King.¹⁷⁷ Franzen seeks the former type of recognition. His “greatness” transcends the marketplace.

¹⁷³ Max Weber, “The Sociology of Charismatic Authority,” in *The Celebrity Culture Reader*, ed. P. David Marshall, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 56.

¹⁷⁴ Grossman.

¹⁷⁵ Burn, “Jonathan Franzen, The Art of Fiction No. 207.”

¹⁷⁶ Grossman.

¹⁷⁷ Franzen, *How to Be Alone*, 62. In “Why Bother?” and the earlier “Perchance to Dream,” Franzen described the value of *Time* for his father, but more broadly American culture during the early to mid-twentieth century: “I can report that my father, who was not a reader nevertheless had some acquaintance with James Baldwin and John Cheever, because *Time* magazine put them on its cover and *Time*, for my father, was the ultimate cultural authority. In the last decade, the magazine whose red border twice enclosed the face of James Joyce has devoted covers to Scott Turow and Stephen King. These are honorable writers; but no one doubts



Fig. 8: Cover image, Dan Winters, photographer, *Time*, August 12, 2010, accessed January 25, 2017, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20100823,00.html>.

Although he is romanticized by *Time*, the tensions in Franzen's authorial identity problematize his placement alongside authors like Joyce and Morrison. The conflict between literary celebrity and traditions of authorship are visualized here. Weinstein believes the *Time* feature "announces his [Franzen's] status as national celebrity—virtually a fetishized idol."¹⁷⁸ "[F]etishized idol" is an intriguing description of Franzen. By equating his image with "a fetishized idol," Weinstein shows that Franzen requires something from us as an audience. The portrait's style constructs him as an art object and demands that we, in turn, view him as such. The image exudes greatness through its composition and the accompanying text. Through fetishization, Franzen's image wants the audience to consume it, leading to a metonymic desire for his identity.

it was the size of their contracts that won them the covers. The dollar is now the yardstick of cultural authority, and an organ like *Time*, which not long ago aspired to shape the national taste, now serves mainly to reflect it." King's position within literary culture has changed over the years. Now, King is revered as a master of genre fiction and holds significant cultural capital.

¹⁷⁸ Weinstein, 1.

At a promotional event for *Freedom* in London in 2010, Franzen's glasses were stolen from his face. The theft became celebrity news. Publications from *The Guardian*, *NPR*, and the *Los Angeles Times* to *GQ* and *Gawker* produced pieces on the incident. The thieves left a ransom note requesting \$100,000 for the glasses "safe return."¹⁷⁹ Guests at the event reported seeing police helicopters searching the area and expressed "a mix of shock, disbelief and hilarity."¹⁸⁰ The thieves were caught, and one, James Fletcher, eventually recounted the events of the night to *British GQ* in 2012. Fletcher stated, "I'd mentioned several times to my accomplice how much I admired Franzen's frames and thought that they deserved to be the subject of a hostage-ransom situation."¹⁸¹ He ended his article by describing his admiration of Franzen: "He is one of the most talented writers out there and I have the utmost respect for the man. I just hope he didn't get the wrong impression from my actions and was able to take it all in good humour."¹⁸² Fletcher's claims show how fans idolize and fetishize celebrities. For Fletcher, Franzen's glasses are a metonym of his authorial identity, and by acquiring them, he can possess a part of Franzen. This type of identification grants significance to parts of his identity. His visual images and the meanings attached to them function metonymically through his glasses. Although his glasses are necessary for his life, they have become a focal point. Audiences often recognize him more by

¹⁷⁹ Benedict Page, "Jonathan Franzen's Glasses Held to Ransom," *The Guardian*, October 5, 2010, accessed January 27, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/05/jonathan-franzen-glasses-held-to-ransom>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ James Fletcher, "Why I Stole Franzen's Glasses," *British GQ*, March 29, 2012, accessed January 03, 2017, <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/gq-books-jonathan-franzen-glasses-thief-interview>.

¹⁸² Ibid.

his glasses than his novels, and this extends to caricatures that appear in top-tier publications like *The New York Times*.¹⁸³



Fig. 9: “Peace and War,” Joe Ciardiello, illustrator, *New York Times*, August 19, 2010, accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/books/review/Tanenhaus-t.html>.

With the publication of his latest novel *Purity*, Franzen satirizes his performance of the author as professional artist via visual media once again. These performances highlight the comedic traits of his authorship. The author photograph used for *Purity* created another layer to his visual performance. In the picture, which has appeared in publications such as *Slate* alongside reviews of the novel, Franzen smiled and stood barefoot on the beach as the surf churns.¹⁸⁴ He was tan and wore a yellow shirt, which disrupted the consistent presentation of his dark wardrobe. It depicted Franzen as an adventurous author through his hiking boots and clothes, and the photographer, Watter Al Bahry, captured him in a moment of pure bliss. The image could be

¹⁸³ See figure 9: Joe Ciardiello, illustrator, image from “Peace and War,” *New York Times*, August 19, 2010, accessed January 26, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/books/review/Tanenhaus-t.html>. For other examples of caricatures of Franzen, see *The New York Times* articles “Jonathan Franzen: By the Book” (April 25, 2013), “Up Front: Jonathan Franzen” (June 3, 2010), and “The Rejections” (October 15, 2006).

¹⁸⁴ See figure 10: Watter Al Bahry, photographer, image from dust jacket of *Purity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

mistaken for a vacation photograph in another context, but as the portrait on a serious author's new novel, the image breaks the prevailing depictions of Franzen in the literary world.

In an interview with "Fresh Air" on NPR, Franzen told Terry Gross the photograph was taken in Egypt after he had returned from a bird watching expedition.¹⁸⁵ Franzen's revelation about the image's setting reinforces the elitism so often associated with him. Few individuals have the opportunity or ability to travel like this, and his success provides him with this luxury, which distances him from his desire to be represented as an author close to the pulse of society. Gross pressed Franzen as to why he chose this particular image since it was such a deviation from previous depictions. He replied, "Because I'm absolutely happy-looking."¹⁸⁶ This highlights the ability of the individual to exert some control over his or her visual representation, especially once renown has been achieved, but at the same time Franzen's enjoyment comes from a privileged experience.

He exerts some authorial intention with this image, nevertheless. He admitted to Gross that it was "weird" audiences did not see him as a happy person, and he blamed himself for this misrepresentation: "But its...maybe I try too hard to keep it under wraps because I already feel sort of guilty for how well things have gone for me. And I have to be photographed with a frown to make clear that I'm not enjoying the experience... [...] ...But really I am enjoying the experience."¹⁸⁷ Franzen revealed his performance, the act that he uses to create his representation. By disrupting his standard role with the *Purity* portrait, he acts against type.

¹⁸⁵ Terry Gross, "Jonathan Franzen on Writing: 'It's An 'Escape From Everything,'" *NPR*, September 1, 2015, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2015/09/01/436442184/jonathan-franzen-on-writing-its-an-escape-from-everything>.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

According to Goffman, cultural performances take place in “region[s],” which have borders or “barriers to perception.”¹⁸⁸ These regions are divided into ““front,”” ““back,”” and ““outside.”” The ““front region”” is the public performance, and this region must maintain cultural “standards” for performances.¹⁸⁹ Franzen made clear to Gross that the majority of his media appearances occur there.

The author photograph from *Purity* and Franzen’s claim of being dismayed by the public reception of his authorship take place in the ““back region”” of his performance. Goffman contends that performers use this site or “backstage” as a reprieve from the audience: performances are dropped and “stored.”¹⁹⁰ For Goffman, “backstage” functions as a site where “illusions and impressions are openly constructed.”¹⁹¹ Franzen’s image and language allow the audience backstage. The image highlights his desire to deconstruct the prevailing representation of him. However, this is problematic because since these are still public performances Franzen’s pulling back of the curtain is a continuation of the “front region.” Goffman contends the performer “can become habituated” to the public performance and “front region character” that any attempts to move backstage become performances as well.¹⁹² Even though it can be taken as an inside look at who he really is as a person, the presentation of it through media—visual and auditory—makes this a continuation of Franzen’s authorial performance. His identity becomes

¹⁸⁸ Goffman, 106.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 107.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 112.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 112.

¹⁹² Ibid., 134.

one that is serious and happy, anxious and relaxed. These new layers combine with previous traits to deepen his persona.



Fig. 10: Author photograph, Watter Al Bahry, photographer, *Purity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

Promoting *Purity* became a way for Franzen to accept his role, while at the same time reveal its depth without fear of losing prestige. A special issue of the *New York Times Style Magazine* entitled “The Greats” juxtaposed him against other public figures/celebrities like Rihanna, Quentin Tarantino, Karl Lagerfeld, Steve McQueen, and Elizabeth Holmes. The visual differences between Franzen’s images and the other celebrities plays upon the traditions often associated with authors. Unlike the other figures’ covers, Franzen’s was not a close-up; instead he was photographed in a long-shot as a car drove past.¹⁹³ The use of this image on the cover instead of a closer shot suggests the often-marginalized position of authors in America. At the same time, the photograph plays upon the feelings Franzen and many other authors have about becoming celebrity figures. Even though the subtitle of his issue is “a generation defining

¹⁹³ See figure 11, left image, Nigel Shafran, photographer, “Jonathan Franzen’s Crackling Genius,” *New York Times Style Magazine*, October 12, 2015, accessed January 09, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/t-magazine/jonathan-franzen-rachel-kushner-interview.html?_r=0.

novelist,” his public image is not as strong as Rihanna’s or Quentin Tarantino’s, who are known as much as if not more than their works.

The fact that this is the only cover with another person in it also signifies the historical distance between the man of letters and society. The driver of the white SUV is an older man with a white beard, wearing, what appears to be, a white cowboy hat. The composition of the image implies Franzen’s elitism. Dressed in all black, he clearly sticks out from the setting, and though he seems out of place, the driver of the SUV threatens him. The driver’s arm is outside of the vehicle in what seems to be a gesture of annoyance or anger, which represents society and its animosity toward the professional artist. Shafran’s photograph reinforces this central tension from Franzen’s authorial identity, which combines with the profile text and other images to Romanticize him as a significant author.

The entire profile sentimentalized Franzen. Rachel Kushner, a writer and journalist, wrote the piece. She called him “a friend” but “not a *close* friend.”¹⁹⁴ This foreshadowed how he would be presented. She painted him from medium range, much like the accompanying photographs.¹⁹⁵ The images and Kushner’s piece created a narrative around Franzen. Neal Gabler believes establishing narrative is a defining feature of celebrity culture.¹⁹⁶ Gabler argues that celebrities create “a movie written in the medium of life,” and narrative “capture[s] our interest and the interest of the media.”¹⁹⁷ Kushner and Shafran’s depictions tell a story, one about the serious

¹⁹⁴ Rachel Kushner, “Jonathan Franzen’s Crackling Genius,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2015, accessed January 09, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/t-magazine/jonathan-franzen-rachel-kushner-interview.html?_r=0.

¹⁹⁵ See figure 11, center and right images.

¹⁹⁶ Neal Gabler, “Toward a New Definition of Celebrity,” University of Southern California, The Norman Lear Center, 4, accessed January 30, 2017, <https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Gabler1.pdf>.

author's role in American culture. Kushner called him an intellectual, a technological skeptic, a critic of consumer capitalism, and an astute observer of character. This combined with the images of Franzen dressed in black standing in waist high grass or sitting on the edge of the road signified that he stood apart from society, while at the same time immersing himself within it, a consistency since his early performances.

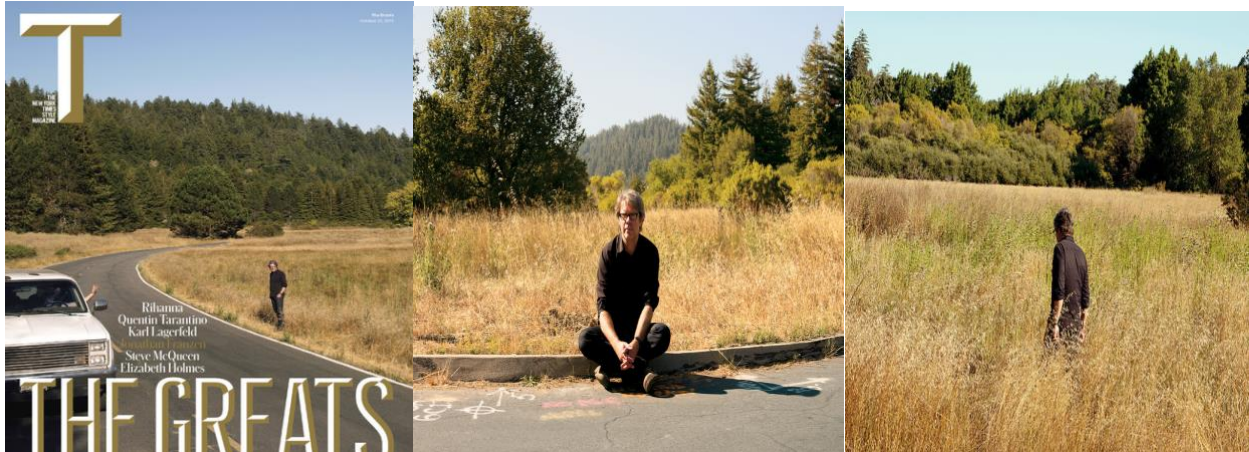


Fig. 11: “Jonathan Franzen’s Crackling Genius,” Nigel Shafran, photographer, *New York Times Style Magazine*, October 12, 2015, accessed January 09, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/t-magazine/jonathan-franzen-rachel-kushner-interview.html?_r=0.

Alongside this appearance, Franzen again promoted his new novel on television; instead of appearing on a show like *Charlie Rose*, he used late-night television as an antithesis to the elitist label. Franzen’s appearances on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *Late Night with Seth Meyers* allowed him to declare that he was “essentially a comic writer.”¹⁹⁸ The interview segments of each show were standard late-night fare. His promotional appearances meant that he must engage with mainstream television’s commercial nature, something he had vehemently

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹⁸ Burn, “Jonathan Franzen, The Art of Fiction No. 207.” In interviews as early as 2010, Franzen described his authorship as comic. This sentiment has been expressed since in various forms. See Terry Gross, “Jonathan Franzen on Writing;” Rachel Kushner, “Jonathan Franzen’s Crackling Genius;” and Philip Weinstein, *Jonathan Franzen: The Comedy of Rage*.

resisted early in his career. Both Colbert and Meyers contextualized Franzen for their audiences through his achievements. They questioned him on the standard topics: his criticism of digital culture, his success with *The Corrections*, and his ideas on the state of literature. This sold him to the viewing audience. His actions betrayed his feelings about being the center of attention, however. During certain points, he was stiff and paused before answering in short declarative sentences.¹⁹⁹ This represented the tension that had been present in Franzen since his first novel, the desire to be a respected professional artist within the literary marketplace.

Even though this central tension was present, Franzen, again, satirized literary culture to breakdown this feature. At one point during his interview on *The Late Show*, Colbert asked him if he read any “non-serious books.” With a dry tone, Franzen stated, “It’s called Fox NFL Sunday.”²⁰⁰ His response collapsed the boundary between high and popular culture. Through his dry tone, he acted elite, while at the same time revealing how he was just a “regular” American man. Other moments functioned in the same manner: at one point, he joked, “I think you’ve mistaken me for someone who cares whether people read books or not.”²⁰¹ This response, as with the NFL comment, garnered laughter from the audience and a sarcastic “Wow!” from

¹⁹⁹ During his appearance on *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, Franzen seems stiff and awkward. His responses and mannerisms are not as free and open as they are on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. Meyers’ questions are more straightforward author questions about his writing process and feelings toward the success of *The Corrections*, whereas Colbert’s questions seem to mask these topics with comedy. Also, possibly at work is the level of cultural capital that Colbert and Meyers hold in popular culture. Franzen may interpret Colbert as being more aligned with his values of cultural capital because of his respect garnered from *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Meyers may not have that level of cultural renown in Franzen’s mind, even though he wrote and appeared on *Saturday Night Live* for thirteen years.

²⁰⁰ *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, “Jonathan Franzen Hates Twitter,” Cbs.com, 2:34, October 28, 2015, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://www.cbs.com/shows/the-late-show-with-stephen-colbert/video/2968DDED-1E59-2402-A53D-B195DC009734/jonathan-franzen-hates-twitter-although-/>.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

Colbert. Franzen's satirical quips showed his ability to perform outside of the prevailing image by adapting himself to the style of the platform. These types of breaks in his performance hint toward an author who's savvy of television's role in increasing recognition and deconstructing tradition.

In short, Franzen's ability to perform satirically on these and other television programs allows him to deconstruct his identity as a brooding, serious author. On *The Late Show*, he performed a skit with Colbert entitled "Jonathan Franzen's Bedtime Stories." The skit features Colbert dressed in night clothes lying in bed with a teddy bear, while Franzen sat in a rocking chair and read a story. The story satirized "Little Red Riding Hood," retitling it "Little Red Reading Hood." It depicted Little Red Reading Hood being devoured by the metaphorical wolf, an amalgamation of Amazon and consumer capitalism. At the end of the segment, Colbert pulled out an Amazon package, removed a copy of *Purity*, and plugged the novel.²⁰² The satirical nature of this performance allowed Franzen to critique the literary marketplace while at the same time participating in it.

This satirical critique resurfaced in the skit he performed for *Late Night with Seth Meyers*. In a pre-taped segment, "Jonathan Franzen Reads from *Purity*," he performed an author reading, poking fun at their pretentiousness. It opened with Franzen speaking soothingly over piano music. He declared he was "here promoting the paperback edition of [...his] most recent novel, *Purity*," and that he'd "like to give a reading from *Purity* [Franzen pauses] from the middle of the book." After this he looked at the camera and mentioned that there was a "small thing" he had to state: "The paperback edition has been sponsored by Adidas. The publishing

²⁰² *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, "Jonathan Franzen's Bedtime Stories," Cbs.com, 2:59, October 28, 2015, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://www.cbs.com/shows/the-late-show-with-stephen-colbert/video/F8D5C6D4-F618-0362-5AEB-B195DC00851B/jonathan-franzen-s-bedtime-stories/>.

industry has been having some trouble lately.” The reading began, and Franzen inserted descriptions of Adidas clothes, shoes, sponsored athletes, and other products into the novel’s narrative. He ended the skit with a very serious tone when mentioning Adidas’ acronymic tagline of “All day I dream about soccer” before the characters “make love.” Concluding, Franzen serenely looked at the camera and elegantly closed the book as the piano music crescendoed.²⁰³ His performance mirrors *The Late Show* one by playing up his aversion to the marketplace, but his willing participation in it. Franzen’s satirical performances at this stage of his career balance out his other media presences.

In the next section of this chapter, I take a closer look at Franzen’s use of digital media to perform the author as professional artist. He does not have favorable views on social media, and his presences on these platforms are, supposedly, not intentional. He uses his print nonfiction to critique how digital media affect literature and the author. Through an analysis of a selection of materials, I show that although he is critical of the digital, Franzen’s appearances on these new media platforms provide yet another tension in his performance as a professional artist.

Digitizing Skepticism

Franzen prefers print media for his authorial performances, making him wary of the use of other media. This skepticism has developed over time into a major characteristic of his authorial identity. In “Perchance to Dream,” Franzen addressed television’s power to provide social and political information to society: “Just as the camera drove a stake through the heart of

²⁰³ *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, “Jonathan Franzen Reads from *Purity*,” Nbc.com, 3:08, August 03, 2016, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://www.nbc.com/late-night-with-seth-meyers/video/jonathan-franzen-reads-from-purity-paperback-sponsored-by-adidas/3080667>.

serious portraiture and landscape painting, television has killed the novel of social reportage.”²⁰⁴ Since then, he refined his critique of television. He now views “serial cable television” as an equivalent “to the serial novel form that Dickens and Dostoyevsky did” in the nineteenth-century.²⁰⁵ Although he has come to at least acknowledge television as a medium for artistic expression, Franzen remains a staunch skeptic of digital media.

He views digital media as less sophisticated. In “What’s Wrong with the Modern World,” published in *The Guardian* in 2013, he expressed his distaste for the technological shift that occurred over the first decade of the twenty-first-century:

But I confess to feeling some version of his disappointment [Franzen is referring to his study and translations of the Austrian writer Karl Kraus and his criticism of early twentieth-century technology and culture] when a novelist who I believe ought to have known better, Salman Rushdie, succumbs to Twitter. Or when a politically committed print magazine that I respect, *n+1*, denigrates print magazines as terminally ‘male,’ celebrates the internet as ‘female,’ and somehow neglects to consider the internet’s accelerating pauperisation of freelance writers. Or when good lefty professors who once resisted alienation—who criticized capitalism for its restless assault on every tradition and every community that gets in its way—start calling the corporatised internet ‘revolutionary.’²⁰⁶

He extended his critique of Twitter and digital technology in general in *The Kraus Project: Essays by Karl Kraus*, writing “I don’t mind technology as my servant; I mind it only as my

²⁰⁴ Franzen, “Perchance to Dream,” 42.

²⁰⁵ Isaac Chotiner, “Jonathan Franzen on Fame, Fascism, and Why He Won’t Write a Book About Race: A Conversation with the Novelist,” *Slate*, July 31, 2016, accessed January 09, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/interrogation/2016/07/a_conversation_with_novelist_jonathan_franzen.html.

²⁰⁶ Franzen, “What’s Wrong with the Modern World,” *The Guardian*, September 13, 2013, accessed January 03, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130913183746/http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/13/jonathan-franzen-wrong-modern-world>. See also, Franzen, *The Kraus Project*, p. 12, where this is reprinted verbatim.

master.”²⁰⁷ Franzen continued in this footnote to compare Twitter use with cigarette smoking and claimed that “Twitter addicts” viewed him as an elitist “Luddite.” Responding to Franzen’s critiques, Salman Rushdie (@SalmanRushdie) wrote, “Dear #Franzen: @MargaretAtwood @JoyceCarolOates @nycnovel @NathanEnglander @Shteyngart and I are fine with Twitter. Enjoy your ivory tower.”²⁰⁸ Rushdie, here, cited the elitism associated with Franzen, and he provided reference to other respected authors who use Twitter avidly to prove its usefulness in the literary world.

Although his comments were construed as an attack on Rushdie and other writers who use Twitter, Franzen’s concerns held some merit. He believed that literary culture’s uncritical embrace of these forms of communication harm emerging writers because they were required to participate in the “yakking and tweeting and bragging” stereotypically associated with digital platforms instead of developing their identities as authors.²⁰⁹ His concerns stem from his romantic views of the literary world. In an interview on the *OtherPPL* podcast in 2016, Franzen described to Brad Listi how he felt print allowed for a more significant “personal connection” because “you’re connecting with another human being” through space and time.²¹⁰ This was lost with digital communication, according to Franzen, and with this loss, users were forced into creating gimmicks to draw attention. He associated a large digital presence with the proliferation of the literary marketplace and the constant need for self-promotion: “I was not, the way so many

²⁰⁷ Franzen, trans., *The Kraus Project: Essays by Karl Kraus* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013): 142n3.

²⁰⁸ Salman Rushdie, Twitter post, September 16, 2013, 4:15 a.m., <https://twitter.com/salmanrushdie/status/379518868571435008?lang=en>.

²⁰⁹ Franzen, “What’s Wrong with the Modern World.”

²¹⁰ Brad Listi, “Episode 426—Jonathan Franzen,” *OtherPPL* podcast, 1:10:40, August 10, 2016, <http://otherppl.com/jonathan-franzen-interview/>.

younger writers nowadays feel compelled—‘I have to have a Facebook page, and I have to tweet’—just because they’ve been told that’s the only way you’re gonna get your book out there. I’m not so sure I believe that just because I’m a little dubious about how the numbers work on that.”²¹¹ The pressures emerging writers face when attempting to publish and promote their work is different than when Franzen entered the scene in the Eighties, but his allegiance to print culture affects how he sees the “need” to be engaged with digital technology for writers now.

Along with this view, Franzen believes new media revolve around capitalist discourse. He described the Amazon model as “making writers into the kind of prospectless workers whom its contractors employ in its warehouses,” and for him, Twitter and Facebook were “one part pyramid scheme, one part wishful thinking, and one part repugnant panoptical surveillance.”²¹² His fears were justified through his claim that his “friends” would be greatly affected by this cultural shift. By crafting his authorial identity around the Romantic and professional views toward the prestige of print, Franzen becomes deeply concerned with the willingness of American society to relinquish control over the creation and distribution of literature from traditional channels.

Not only does he see the digital as an expansion of the marketplace, he views it as a threat to artistic creation. He claimed in *The Guardian* that “there is a risk to all fiction—posed by the new media.”²¹³ The ease of distraction and an abundance of unprofessional texts diluted

²¹¹ Ibid. See also Jonathan Franzen, “A Conversation with Jonathan Franzen,” by Susan Lerner. *Booth: A Journal*, February 13, 2015, accessed October 12, 2017, <http://booth.butler.edu/2015/02/13/a-conversation-with-jonathan-franzen/>. See also Jonathan Franzen, “‘Like a Fish in a Tweed Suit: Jonathan Franzen in Conversation with Manjula Martin,” 266.

²¹² Franzen, trans., *The Kraus Project*, 273-274n3.

²¹³ Franzen, “What’s Wrong with the Modern World.”

the authority of traditional authorship. Franzen told Susan Lerner of the literary magazine *Booth* that he believed social media could never be considered literature because it was only a newer form of communication technology:

It takes a while for artistic media to mature—I take that point—but I don’t know anyone who thinks that social media is an artistic medium. It’s more like another phone, home movies, email, whatever. It’s like a better version of the way people socially interacted in the past, a more technologically advanced version. But if you use your Facebook page to publish chapters of a novel, what you get is a novel, not Facebook. It’s a struggle to imagine what value is added by the technology itself.²¹⁴

For Franzen, print was the only medium suited to the traditions of the literary world.

Franzen, however, is not a Luddite given that he does perform his authorial identity in digital media. Although he is reluctant to embrace social media and other platforms, he has web presences.²¹⁵ In an interview with *Slate*, he described why he was not on Facebook: “I don’t professionally have to be on it.” He continued, “Acknowledging that that’s a privilege, I am not hounded by my publisher to promote via Facebook.”²¹⁶ He, nevertheless, does have an official Facebook page, which FSG maintains. Franzen’s claim is partially correct: he does not have to post or *author* the page; his publisher *authors* a page, promoting his authorial identity on social media.

²¹⁴ Franzen, “A Conversation with Jonathan Franzen,” by Susan Lerner. *Booth: A Journal*, February 13, 2015, accessed October 12, 2017, <http://booth.butler.edu/2015/02/13/a-conversation-with-jonathan-franzen/>.

²¹⁵ See Listi, “Episode 426—Jonathan Franzen.” Franzen told Listi that FSG created an official Twitter profile to stop fraudulent accounts. It is inactive.

²¹⁶ Chotiner, “Jonathan Franzen on Fame, Fascism, and Why He Won’t Write a Book About Race: A Conversation with the Novelist.” See also Listi, “Episode 426—Jonathan Franzen.” Franzen made clear to Listi that he did not have to use social media and that it stemmed from his success before the media became popular.

FSG provides material on Franzen's Facebook page to support his performance of the author as professional artist. The posts operate as self-promotion.²¹⁷ In a profile printed in *The Guardian*, he admitted that "self-promot[ion]" was "a bad head for any sort of artist," claiming that this stemmed from the breakdown of cultural gatekeepers such as publishers because no longer were there "serious firewalls" between the artist and the buying public.²¹⁸ By operating Franzen's Facebook page, FSG fulfills the role of cultural gatekeeper. They assume the business of self-promotion for him, allowing him to focus on artistic creation. The page contains only eleven photographs, and only two feature Franzen's image: the profile picture, which is the author photograph from *Freedom*, and a blurry picture of him and fellow FSG author Jeffrey Eugenides. The others are book covers. Franzen's art is stressed over the public identity, implying that FSG believes his Facebook followers already accept his authorship.



Fig. 12. Screenshot of Franzen's Facebook, accessed January 31, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/jonathanfranzen/>.

²¹⁷ See figure 12: Screenshot of Jonathan Franzen's Facebook page, accessed January 31, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/jonathanfranzen/>.

²¹⁸ Emma Brockes, "Jonathan Franzen interview: 'There Is No Way to Make Myself Not Male,'" *The Guardian*, august 21, 2015, accessed January 04, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/aug/21/jonathan-franzen-purity-interview>.

Through strategic social media postings, FSG maintains the split authorial identity Franzen performs across other media. The page is not updated regularly, but FSG provides blurbs and links to pieces by Franzen, about Franzen, or about his works, mainly from culturally prestigious publications, such as *The New Yorker* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Interestingly, FSG embeds YouTube videos of Franzen's satirical performances on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and *Late Night with Seth Meyers*. This limited yet highly curated posting strategy supports the prevailing image of Franzen as the professional artist who is comfortable with himself at this later stage of his career.

His website offers audiences another digital performance. Like his Facebook, Macmillan, the parent company of FSG, maintains the website.²¹⁹ It is sparse compared to the texts available on Facebook; however, the website does contain similar promotional material. The brief biography lists Franzen's novels and memberships in American, German, and French literary societies, but perhaps the biggest identifier in the biography is labeling him as a "National Book Awards Winner," which does not appear on Facebook. Making this a focal point of the website mirrors the categorizations other mediators have made toward Franzen. The major difference between the website and Facebook is Franzen's visual performances are heavily promoted. Links to numerous videos from his 2010 appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to a series of web videos for *Big Think* are available to the page's visitors.

²¹⁹ See figure 13: Screenshot of Jonathan Franzen's webpage at Macmillan Publishers, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://us.macmillan.com/author/jonathanfranz/>.

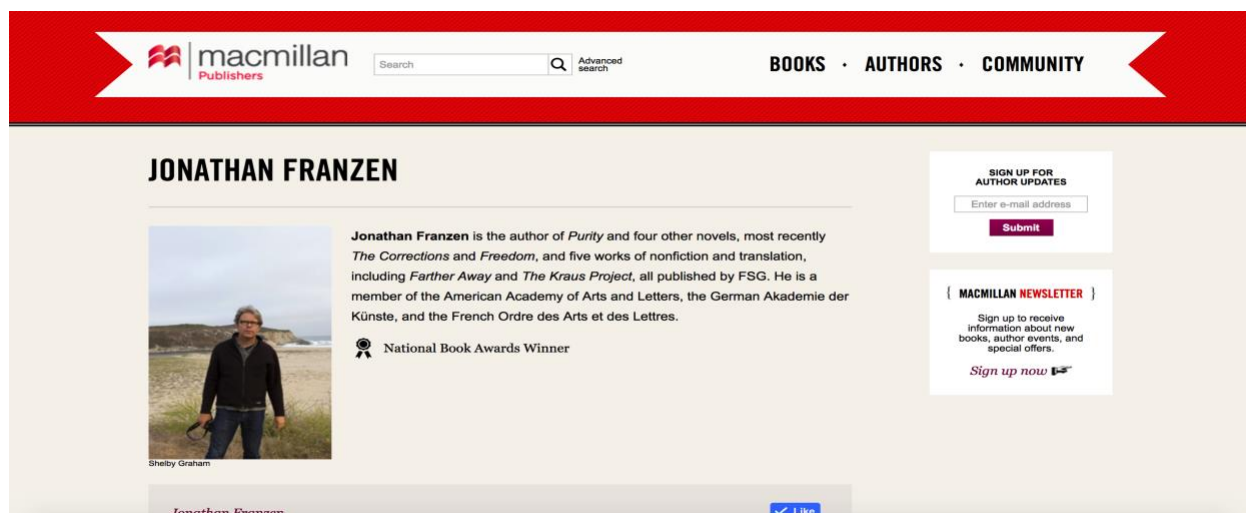


Fig. 13: Screenshot of Franzen's webpage, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://us.macmillan.com/author/jonathanfranzen/>.

The focus on visual images by Macmillan highlights the market's fascination with celebrity and persona. In the featured web video, "Jonathan Franzen on Author Videos and the Novel," he promoted his 2010 novel *Freedom*. Macmillan produced the video, which could explain why it was embedded prominently into the site. Franzen acted uncomfortable, suggesting that he did not value participating in this type of promotion. At the beginning of the video, he openly addressed his distaste: "Um. Well, this might be a good place for me to register my profound discomfort [...] at having to make videos like this, since to me the point of a novel is to take you to a still place."²²⁰ His body language signified his discomfort, like his language directly stated. When he said "discomfort," Franzen looked directly at the camera. This turn toward the viewer, and a direct comment to his publisher, read as a plea to heed his call to read a book, escape into quiet, and get away from technology.

Escape is a constant theme in Franzen's interactions with digital media. He told Listi, "I have to escape it for four to six hours a day," and that the remainder of his day was spent "living

²²⁰ MacmillanUSA, "Jonathan Franzen on Author Videos & the Novel," YouTube video, 2:23, August 14, 2010, accessed February 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm3yuWEvCgw>.

in that wired world, or wireless world now.”²²¹ The digital world causes him to retreat into a Romantic version of society. However, his performance in “Jonathan Franzen on Author Videos and the Novel,” teeters between the two poles of his authorial identity, the professional artist and the literary celebrity. Even though he expressed his “discomfort” with participating in marketing his persona and art, he recognized the need for this type of digital performance nowadays: “To me, the world of books is the quiet alternative [to our media and information saturated society]. Uh, an evermore desperately needed alternative. . . . I understand that not everyone sees it that way, and I understand that a lot of commerce happens online now. So, I think it amiably good sense to be recording little videos like this.”²²² His value of the “quiet” of books and other print media contrasts the noise of the digital. Franzen romanticizes traditional print culture, but at the same time his performance yields to the pressures of the literary marketplace.

Franzen performs his authorial identity as a professional artist across digital media reluctantly. Although he expresses reservations about the use of social media and other platforms for self-promotion, he has a responsibility to cooperate with his publisher in promoting his works. Digital media becomes both a blessing and a curse for him. By distancing himself from new media, Franzen maintains his image as an elitist, but through his continual appearances in the digital, his savviness toward the media’s capacity to generate attention to authors and their works counteracts his professed aversion to their effects on the literary world.

Finalizing Franzen

²²¹ Listi, “Episode 426—Jonathan Franzen.”

²²² Ibid.

Franzen performs as the professional artist across multiple media and against a backdrop of conflict. His and FSG's early staging of his identity as a serious author created tension with his relationship to the literary marketplace. It was through ultimately embracing the tensions between the Romantic and professional traditions of authorship and their current commercial natures that Franzen settled into performing his roles.

An author's maturing leads to a feeling of comfort in one's identity. As his career has progressed, Franzen has accepted the contention around his performance as a professional artist. In "On Autobiographical Fiction," he lamented not being "a tower of remoteness and command and intellect like DeLillo or Pynchon."²²³ These authors formed his early ideas of the author's role in literary culture. The author as an individual removed from society stems from the continued Romanticizing of authorship. Even though he enacts this tradition in many of his media performances, Franzen's literary celebrity makes it difficult to truly become this type. He concluded that "[b]eing loyal to yourself as a writer" was one of the foundations for all authors to uphold as they developed their identities.²²⁴

The epigraphs beginning this chapter distinguish how Jonathan Franzen's authorial identity is performed in the literary world. Through constant revisions, he exhibits agency over the way he is represented. Wells' assertion that Franzen is as divisive as Kanye West is striking because it seems so far off base. Wells' quote, however, serves a significant purpose in contextualizing Franzen's literary value. He has brought the professional artist identity back into the cultural imagination like few other, and that is where the comparison between Franzen and West is apt. His authorship is a lightning rod for many cultural figures because of his

²²³ Jonathan Franzen, *Farther Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 136.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

unapologetic views. Claims of elitism only bolster Franzen's presences because, as he states, "The only power that matters to me—and it matters a lot—is the power of writing."²²⁵ It is through these "elitist" views that Franzen draws attention to traditions.

Although he may not appear on *TMZ* or the cover of *People*, Jonathan Franzen provides the literary world with a divisive figure who embraces his role. In an interview with Jeffrey Brown for *PBS News Hours*, Franzen contended that his "strong opinions" and "visibility" drew attention to the conflicts present not only in his performances of authorship but also the wider literary world. Through these conflicts, he highlights the continued commercialization of authorial personae and literary art, digitization of cultural production, and degradation of high culture. These concerns can be misinterpreted as elitist compared to more pressing socio-cultural issues, but for Franzen, they represent central traits of his identity as a professional artist.

²²⁵ Franzen, "Like a Fish in a Tweed Suit: Jonathan Franzen in Conversation with Manjula Martin," interviewed by Manjula Martin, *Scratch: Writers, Money, and the Art of Making a Living*, ed. Manjula Martin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017): 264.

Chapter 2

The Author as Sacred Genius: David Foster Wallace

“I’m an exhibitionist who wants to hide, but is unsuccessful at hiding; therefore, somehow I succeed.”

—David Foster Wallace, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,”
Conversations with David Foster Wallace (2012), 43.

“As more than one critic has observed, Wallace’s death, and the private suffering that it revealed, has led to the formation of an iconic posthumous public image that some of his friends have taken to calling ‘Saint Dave.’”

—Laura Miller, “David Foster Wallace and the Perils of ‘LitChat,’” *The New Yorker*,
September 8, 2015.

“...Wallace may be the closest thing to a method actor in American literature.”

—Tom Bissell, Forward: “Everything About Everything: *Infinite Jest*, Twenty Years Later,” in *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace (New York: Back Bay Books, 2016), xiv.

David Foster Wallace’s legacy is one of contrasts. On one hand, Wallace represents a contemporary Romantic genius, whose works push the boundaries of literary art. On the other hand, he is a media created sensation, whose persona has become celebrated for its indifference to the mainstream and whose death could have been more than a battle against inner demons.²²⁶ Franzen struggled with his thoughts that Wallace used “suicide as a career move” and envisioned it as an act of “adulation-craving calculation.”²²⁷ Brett Easton Ellis, a controversial writer

²²⁶ David Foster Wallace suffered for his entire life with severe depression and addiction. Although this is a significant part of Wallace’s characteristics, my focus is on the creation of an authorial persona, not a psychological profile of the author. For more information on Wallace’s battles with mental health, his treatments, and his family’s concerns for his well-being see D.T. Max’s biography, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012).

²²⁷ Franzen, *Farther Away*, 42.

himself, tweeted on September 6, 2012 that “DFW is the best example of a contemporary male writer lusting for a kind of awful greatness that he simply wasn’t able to achieve. A fraud.”²²⁸ Ellis charged that Wallace was more conscious of his authorial performance than he put on. Wallace performed his authorial identity to ensure posthumous recognition. This made him a literary saint. Both in life and death, Wallace performed the author as scared genius.

Wallace published *The Broom of the System* in 1986, and he was instantly compared to Postmodernists like Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis. In *Arrival*, William R. Katovsky described Wallace’s authorship as a mixture of “heady philosophizing” and “a playfulness of intent rooted in pop culture.”²²⁹ The early comparisons to Postmodernists placed Wallace within a restrictive environment, and he resisted such characterizations. In “A Whiz Kid and His Wacky First Novel,” which appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, Wallace stated, “These are writers [Pynchon and DeLillo] I admire but the five-year-old in me pushes out its lower lip and says, ‘Well, no, I’m a person, too. I do my own work.’”²³⁰ The critical reception of his first novel and the proclamations of his “whiz kid”/genius established him as an author to pay attention to. His rebellious acts and his desire to craft his own authorial identity highlighted his supposed rejection of tradition made him a Romantic figure for members of the literary world.

Although he flirted with literary celebrity with his first novel, Wallace truly arrived with the publication of *Infinite Jest* in 1996. Matthew Gilbert of the *Boston Globe* described how the novel established Wallace as an heir to Pynchon, “the voice of Generation X,” and “a hero of

²²⁸ Bret Easton Ellis, Twitter post, September 6, 2012, 5:05 a.m., <https://twitter.com/breastonellis/status/243635989111775232>.

²²⁹ William R. Katovsky, “David Foster Wallace: A Profile,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 5.

²³⁰ Helen Dudar, “A Whiz Kid and His Wacky First Novel,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 10.

grad students and alternative readers everywhere, including the Internet.”²³¹ Anne Marie Donahue contended, “Whatever the cost of celebrity, Wallace, at thirty-four, is about as famous as serious writers get in this country before they’ve been dead for quite a while.”²³² His sudden rise to fame forced him to negotiate the divide between, in Bourdieu’s distinction, high and popular culture. His “press-phobia” pushed against his “loyalty to his publisher, Little, Brown.”²³³ Little, Brown invested in Wallace and *Infinite Jest*, and through their investment, the publishing house required some form of participation in the promotion of the novel and himself as an author.

This differed significantly from Franzen’s conflict because Wallace focused his efforts in courting a largely intellectual audience both through his media presences and art. To build hype, Little, Brown used the size of the book to suggest its importance.²³⁴ In a similar fashion, the company marketed Wallace as the “new Wunderkind” of Generation X, which needed “a maverick, idiosyncratic literary voice all their own.”²³⁵ Little, Brown’s marketing of *Infinite Jest* and Wallace’s authorial identity foregrounded his artistry and nonconformity to tradition, which suggested value to the literary world. Subsequently, his death informs how his authorial identity

²³¹ Matthew Gilbert, “The ‘Infinite Story:’ Cult Hero Behind 1,079-Page Novel Rides the Hype He Skewered,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 76.

²³² Anne Marie Donahue, “David Foster Wallace Winces at the Suggestion That His Book Is Sloppy in Any Sense,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 70.

²³³ Gilbert, 76.

²³⁴ Frank Bruni, “The Grunge American Novel,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 24, 1996, accessed February 8, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/24/magazine/the-grunge-american-novel.html>.

²³⁵ Ibid.

is represented and parodied, especially within visual and digital media. Wallace's consistent focus on his image reveals that he was highly conscious of maintaining a prevailing representation. His print, audio/visual, and online presences show how he and others co-authored this authorial identity, Romanticizing him as a sacred genius.

My analysis in this chapter takes into consideration a few of his earlier essays, but mainly the chapter develops from the promotion and reception of *Infinite Jest* through posthumous appearances. By looking closely at how he represents himself, how the publications are complicit in these representations, and how his peers ultimately maintain his image, I highlight how Wallace performed his public identity across multiple media channels and the great care in which he and others have taken in preserving the author as sacred genius identity.

Print Icon

Wallace largely performed his authorial identity in the traditional manner of the author writing for and in print. He produced two novels, three short-story collections, and two essay collections while alive, which does not include numerous uncollected essays, reviews, and critical analyses. He wrote nonfiction for a range of print publications: from *Harper's* to popular magazines such as *Rolling Stone*. During his lifetime, he participated in interviews across a wide variety of print publications as well. Two posthumous works received much critical praise after his suicide: the unfinished novel, *The Pale King* (2010), and another collection of essays, *Both Flesh and Not* (2013). Along with numerous memorials and critical essays about him or his works, Wallace's print appearances have expanded significantly over the past nine years.

Representation within literary culture through print becomes an ever-present concern for Wallace. According to Michael Silverblatt, his authorial identity is “real—homemade versus being slick, seamless, more like a corporate product” in the performance of authorship.²³⁶ The fact that Little, Brown, which is a subsidiary of a multi-national corporation, publishes Wallace’s books problematizes his desire to be seen outside the mainstream market, however. His sacred genius lies in his ability to act indifferent to the literary marketplace, while at the same time recognizing its role in developing lasting significance. Print interviews provided him with an opportunity to steer attention toward a specific image of his authorship. According to Stephen J. Burn, Wallace saw interviews as something “that could not be coolly divorced from the creative practice” and that his interviews stressed the difference between “Wallace-the-person” and Wallace-the-author.²³⁷ In this way, print provides him with the platform to present his desired image. He used it to perform authorship that favored notions of literary value and legitimacy. At the same time, he criticized contemporary culture’s fascination with commodifying the author and his identity, which itself was part of the traditions of authorship.

His attempt to not become a commodity, however, was difficult to achieve even in academic publications. In “The Young Writers” special issue of *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Wallace appeared alongside William Vollmann and Susan Daitch. Wallace had already been compared to Postmodern luminaries by this time, and the focus of the issue extended his image as a serious author taking up the pen proscribed to him by these forefathers. Calling attention to Wallace’s age allowed the editors to allude to his significance. “E Unibus Pluram:

²³⁶ Michael Silverblatt, “David Foster Wallace: Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,” *Bookworm*, KCRW, August 3, 2000, accessed April 18, 2017, <https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/david-foster-wallace-brief-interviews-with-hideous-men>.

²³⁷ Stephen J. Burn, introduction to *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), ix-x.

Television and U.S. Fiction” was published here first, and Wallace also participated in a lengthy interview with Larry McCaffery.²³⁸ These two early pieces show him performing an authorial identity that would pigeonhole him for the remainder of his career. He seeks to establish an identity built upon literary history with a return to a tradition of unironic authorship.

“E Unibus Pluram” provided Wallace a space to enact his authorial identity against the technological and media shifts of the late-twentieth-century. He contended that television’s place as America’s primary medium created a desire to be watched in everyone, including writers. This, in turn, altered how writers write and perceive themselves.²³⁹ For Wallace, being watched and watching broke with the inward focus of literary tradition. At the beginning of the essay, he asserted, “Fiction writers as a species tend to be oglers.”²⁴⁰ As “voyeurs,” writers, especially literary fiction writers, are “predatory” animals, feeding off society and human interactions to nourish their art.²⁴¹ Unlike Franzen’s view of the fiction writer as a man of the people, Wallace posits that the writer is always separate from society because of the need to observe. These traits have been replaced, according to Wallace, with a reliance on television. Since “television is performance, spectacle, which by definition requires watchers,” he argued that the contemporary

²³⁸ The versions I use are not precisely those that appear in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Summer 1993). For “E Unibus Pluram,” I use the version published in Wallace’s first essay collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* (Little, Brown and Company, 1997), and for “An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” I use “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace” that has been collected in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, edited by Stephen J. Burn (Univ. Press of Miss., 2012). They differ slightly from their originals, especially the interview which includes deleted questions.

²³⁹ David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 34. From here out abbreviated *ASFT*.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21-23.

writer's job was distorted through television's display of "a gorgeous orgy of illusions."²⁴² The effects of these "illusions" reach beyond just the writer and art. Wallace believed television conditioned us to view all social and cultural interactions as "extant only as performance."²⁴³ The Romantic tradition of authorship is reversed here, and Wallace's own authorship operates as a performative act against this change. Authors, for Wallace, become another group of social actors seeking audiences.

Wallace used history to combat the effects television had on the literary world. He highlighted the "terribly self-conscious" nature of writers over public representations.²⁴⁴ He believed writers who sought attention and celebrity were acting against type: "The result is that a majority of fiction writers, born watchers, tend to dislike being objects of people's attention. Dislike being watched. The exceptions to this rule—Mailer, McInerney—sometimes create the impression that most belletristic types covet people's attention. Most don't. The few who like attention just naturally get more attention. The rest of us watch."²⁴⁵ He categorized authors based on cultural values. By distinguishing between two types of authorship, he foregrounded the effects other media had on the literary world. These groups have certain practices and view the role of the author differently, as he clearly pointed out. His ending statement, "The rest of us watch," labels his authorial performance. He wants the audience, which consists primarily of other writers and the academic community, to view him as a representative of tradition, not a

²⁴² Ibid., 23.

²⁴³ Ibid., 64.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

product of commercial culture. Leveraging his performance in “E Unibus Pluram” against the marketplace and television allowed him to gain literary value.

Ultimately, Wallace romanticized this form of authorship. He wanted to “rebel against TV’s aesthetic of rebellion” and to declare that new authors needed to be willing to move beyond Postmodern media culture to accomplish this.²⁴⁶ His call placed significant value on more traditional conceptions of authorship:

The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point.²⁴⁷

Contemporary authors needed to return to the everyday and produce works that represented social life. These authors would create a better image of society through this renewed focus, but in exchange they would lose the immediate valorization of their authorship and works in the literary marketplace.

Doubling-down on his search for a new form of authorial *anti*-rebellion, Wallace told McCaffery that “younger writers owe themselves a richer account of just why TV’s become such a dominating force on people’s consciousness, if only because we under like forty have spent our whole conscious lives being *part* of TV’s audience.”²⁴⁸ Although slightly anachronistic, his description of his generation is significant because it shows the shift in value that has occurred

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 68-69.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 81.

²⁴⁸ Larry McCaffery, “An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 21.

over the last fifty years. Beginning with television and extending now to the Internet, people can view and hear things previous generations could only imagine. This has a tremendous effect on the development of Wallace's authorial identity:

For our generation, the entire world seems to present itself as 'familiar,' but since that's of course an illusion in terms of anything really important about people, maybe any 'realistic' fiction's job is opposite what it used to be—no longer making the strange familiar but making the familiar *strange* again. It seems important to find ways of reminding ourselves that most 'familiarity' is mediated and delusive.²⁴⁹

He understood there was a divide between "serious art" and "popular art," and though the two have converged at points, "serious art" functioned as a way to "make you [the audience and possibly the artist] uncomfortable, or to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort."²⁵⁰ These features directly contrasted television. Wallace colloquially summed up his view of literary art as "what it is about to be a fucking *human being*."²⁵¹ This reveals the heart of Wallace's authorial performance: literature serves a higher purpose to both society and the author. It is a way to disrupt through entertainment.

Wallace was not immune to the effects of television, however. Acknowledging that "the main goal of art is simply to *entertain*, give people sheer pleasure" placed him outside of the Romantic views many serious authors held.²⁵² Romantic authorship bothered Wallace and he used the McCaffery interview to criticize this concept. Early on in the interview, he cast himself in opposition to the stereotypes surrounding authors. Wallace's verbal takedown of "[a]ll the

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 38.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 21-22.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 26.

²⁵² Ibid., 24.

beret-wearing *artistes* I went to school with” exhibited a bit of authorial posturing.²⁵³ By revealing his “terror” of being represented in this manner, he performed his authorship as *real*, much like Franzen in “Perchance to Dream.” Wallace desired to be in tune with society not discordant with it. Through being *real*, Wallace placed his art and his authorial identity within the break between stereotypical performances of authorship.

Even though he claimed to be a boundary pusher, Wallace fell victim to one of the main pulls of the marketplace, that of image maintenance. This led him to become even more self-conscious of his public image, which boiled down to him simply wanting “to be *liked*.”²⁵⁴ Likeability was not at the center of his authorial performance, and he believed that many contemporary writers were possessed with a “desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader,” which he saw as a struggle for control. He admitted to McCaffery that many of his stylistic traits were attempts to wrestle power back from the reader by making his art difficult, and he used “the form of sentences that are syntactically not incorrect but still a real bitch to read” and “bludgeoning the reader with data” as antagonistic techniques.²⁵⁵ These features of his art created an image of Wallace as a literary genius, an experimenter with language and form that pushed literature beyond simple entertainment.

However, his style masked his need to be accepted. In answering McCaffery’s question about his writing being “play,” Wallace contended, “What’s poisonous about the cultural environment today is that it makes this [serious literature] so scary to try to carry out.” He

²⁵³ Ibid., 28. A variation of this appears later in the interview: “The idea of trying to be a ‘writer’ repelled me, mostly because of all the foppish aesthetes I knew at school who went around in berets stroking their chins calling themselves writers. I have a terror of seeming like those guys, still” (35).

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 24.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 25.

compared his type of writing with revealing oneself to the reader, but he also acknowledged how this was “banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy.” His self-consciousness caused him to be “scared about how sappy this’ll look in print, saying this” because serious authors should not be concerned with these types of things.²⁵⁶ A heightened performance emerges at this moment. Wallace’s language illuminates his desire to be seen in a certain way. His concern about how he is perceived by audiences, whether in academic journals like *Review of Contemporary Fiction* or in popular publications like *The New York Times*, shows that he is conscious of image and the effects it has upon one’s authorial identity. Through these concerns, Wallace constructs his iconic image.

Wallace’s performance of the author as sacred genius hit its highpoint with the publication of *Infinite Jest*. The novel’s length, 1079-pages, and copious endnotes made it an oddity in the literary world. His first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), and his first short-story collection, *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989), were not *New York Times* bestsellers but were critical and cult successes. The size and style of *Infinite Jest* presented a massive risk for Little, Brown, but the publisher turned them into selling points. By promoting the novel’s length as a symbol of its significance, Little, Brown challenged potential audiences.²⁵⁷ According to David Streitfeld in the men’s magazine *Details*, this worked because it gave the impression that the novel was “bigger, more ambitious, and better than anything else being published in the U.S. right now.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 50.

²⁵⁷ Bruni. See also Patrick Arden, “David Foster Wallace Warms Up,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 97.

²⁵⁸ David Streitfeld, “The Wasted Land,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 66.

A particular image of Wallace surfaced across media channels with the promotion of *Infinite Jest*. Wallace as a literary genius who was attuned to the sensibilities and anxieties of the late-twentieth-century. In essence, he became a Romantic icon during this time. Reviewers called him a “virtuoso” and an author who “can play it high or low, a sort of Beavis-and-Egghead approach.”²⁵⁹ The word *virtuoso* cast Wallace as an author who’s masterful in his craft, but also separate from regular individuals through his genius. However, the juxtaposition of his “virtuoso” identity with that of a crass image from popular culture—“Beavis-and-Egghead,” which plays off of the popularity of the 1990s MTV show *Beavis and Butthead* and the cultural diminishing of intelligence—created a paradox around his image.

Attaching iconographic features to Wallace was a prevalent feature in print. In a review of *Infinite Jest* for *The Atlantic*, Sven Birkerts stated, “Among writers of the younger—which these days means under forty—generation, David Foster Wallace has a reputation as a wild-card savant.”²⁶⁰ Birkerts’s “wild-card savant” marked Wallace’s authorial identity; he becomes an unpredictable genius, one who can be considered influential but also one whose scope of influence hinges on something unknown. His reputation depended upon the reception of *Infinite Jest*, and his place as a literary icon was weighted toward the future. Birkerts firmly placed Wallace within literary history, even as he imagined him beyond it. Throughout the review, Birkerts referenced Wallace’s shared traits with other literary figures such as Beckett, Pynchon, and Gaddis. Categorizing Wallace as a continuation from these figures, Birkerts constructed him

²⁵⁹ R.Z. Sheppard, “Mad Maximalism,” *Time*, February 19, 1996, 70, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost, accessed March 10, 2017, <http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,cookie,uid&db=a9h&AN=9602137662&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

²⁶⁰ Sven Birkerts, “The Alchemist’s Retort,” *The Atlantic*, February 1996, accessed March 10, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/02/the-alchemists-retort/376533/>.

as an avant-gardist. Beckett, Pynchon, and Gaddis loom over interpretations of difficult, experimental literature, and associating Wallace and *Infinite Jest* with these men and their works grants him cultural capital. Birkerts's glowing review in a prestigious publication validated Wallace as a significant author.

At the same time, Wallace's performance during the promotion of *Infinite Jest* revealed authorship's deep-seated conflict with the literary marketplace and the lasting effects of the Romantic tradition. In a review in *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani called Wallace "an experimental artist" and a "word machine" because of how he used language and narrative structure in the novel.²⁶¹ Even though she did not have a favorable opinion of the book, Kakutani's role as the lead reviewer and *The New York Times*'s prestige legitimized Wallace. He extended this image by describing his work as "caviar for the general literary fiction reader" to Laura Miller of *Salon*.²⁶² Although he categorized his work as being luxuriant and elitist, he admitted to Miller that he considered himself "a realist" author as opposed to the representation of him as a difficult Postmodernist.²⁶³ These descriptions by Wallace and Kakutani established a central conflict within his authorial performances. He wanted to enact his authorship against the literary marketplace by hypocritically providing a delicacy, but he acted as if he was palatable to mass audiences' tastes.

²⁶¹ Michiko Kakutani, "Book of the Times: A Country Dying of Laughter. In 1,079 Pages," *The New York Times*, February 13, 1996, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/13/books/books-of-the-times-a-country-dying-of-laughter-in-1079-pages.html>.

²⁶² Laura Miller, "The *Salon* Interview: David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 59-60.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 60.

Like other serious authors, such as Franzen, Wallace felt compelled to expose the ever-dissolving boundaries between the author and the marketplace. In an interview in the *Boston Phoenix*, he stated, “So I come to writing from a pretty hard-core, abstract place. It comes out of technical philosophy and continental European theory, and extreme avant-garde shit. I’m not just talking Pynchon and Gaddis. That’s commercial avant-garde. I’m talking Beckett, and Fiction Collective 2, and Dalkey Archive.”²⁶⁴ This points toward how he envisions his authorial identity. By placing it within the philosophical and theoretical traditions of Europe, Wallace incorporates a degree of intellectualism, and while his authorial identity is akin to Western culture’s great thinkers, this association differentiates him from more “commercial avant-garde” authors. This move pushes Wallace toward art and away from the marketplace.

Perhaps the most distinguishing aspect of Wallace’s statement is his categorization of Pynchon and Gaddis as “commercial avant-garde,” ultimately downgrading their prestige. He values the less commercially oriented literature coming from Beckett and the two publishers he mentions—Fiction Collective 2 and Dalkey Archive. Fiction Collective 2 and Dalkey Archive publish experimental literature, although that may not be the main case for his admiration and desire to associate his authorship with them. Fiction Collective 2 is a non-profit publisher; it

²⁶⁴ Donahue, 71. See also David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010). Over the course of the interview, which took place in March 1996, Wallace mentions numerous times how he associates himself with “a more theoretical avant-garde tradition” (141). This book and the subsequent film adaptation, *The End of the Tour* (2015), have been criticized in their depiction of Wallace by critics and the Wallace Foundation (See Glenn Kenny, “Why the End of the Tour Isn’t Really About My Friend David Foster Wallace,” *The Guardian*, July 29, 2015 and Bret Easton Ellis, “The End of the Tour and Thoughts on David Foster Wallace,” *BretEastonEllis* (blog), Bret Easton Ellis, June 8, 2015). However, Lipsky does provide a lengthy glimpse into a specific moment in Wallace’s performance of authorial identity and his interpretations of authorship and celebrity after the publication of *Infinite Jest*.

maintains itself through grants, donations, and associations with universities.²⁶⁵ Dalkey Archive, on the other hand, is an independent press that is not as profit driven as more mainstream publishers. Like Fiction Collective 2, it receives much of its funding from other means, particularly the National Endowment for the Arts. According to John O'Brien, the founder of the press, Dalkey Archive is concerned with "creating a space" that does not put "the whims of the marketplace" onto authors and works.²⁶⁶ This shows Dalkey Archive's maintenance of a tradition of Romantic authorship. The references to these two publishing presses and to Samuel Beckett allow Wallace to perform in opposition to the market.

However, *Infinite Jest*'s publication by Little, Brown placed Wallace firmly within the mainstream literary marketplace. Little, Brown publishes other serious authors, like J.D. Salinger, but the majority of their output is by popular writers such as James Patterson.²⁶⁷ Their position as a mainstream publishing company provides Wallace with the resources to distribute his dense works to a wide audience, but the conflict between his romanticized view of literary culture and the profit-driven model of the large-scale publisher makes his attempts to associate his authorial identity with the art-for-art sake community appear hypocritical.

The paratexts surrounding *Infinite Jest* provide a glimpse at how Little, Brown marketed Wallace as an author whose name connotes a certain type of literature. The cover established his identity through its use of imagery and typography. In a discussion with Lipsky, Wallace stated Michael Pietsch, his editor, convinced him to give up on using a scene from Fritz Lang's

²⁶⁵ "About Fiction Collective 2," *Fiction Collective 2*, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.fc2.org/about.html>.

²⁶⁶ "An Interview with John O'Brien," *Dalkey Archive Press*, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/interview-with-john-obrien/>.

²⁶⁷ "About Little, Brown," *Little, Brown and Company*, accessed March 29, 2017, <http://www.littlebrown.com/about.html>.

Metropolis (1927) as the cover image because “it was too busy and too like conceptual, it required too much *brain work* on the part of the audience.”²⁶⁸ This stylistic choice mirrors Wallace’s view that serious literature should challenge the audience. It also shows him attempting to once again associate himself and his work with a revered noncommercial artist. To make it more marketable, the cover of the first edition featured a background of a blue sky with clouds and the title and author’s name floating in this skyscape.²⁶⁹ Wallace disliked the cover because it looked too commercial and too banal, and he felt slighted because he didn’t have control over this part of his novel.²⁷⁰ The literary marketplace forced Wallace to alter his vision and accept his lesser role as a cultural producer. To make the book and him appear like good products, a cover that could be easily consumed was needed. Although he desired to control all aspects of the novel’s publication, Wallace realized interacting with a large-scale publisher required relinquishing certain levels of authorial control, at least until he had gained more clout.

His authorial identity was co-authored by it, even though he did not have a direct hand in the creation of the cover image. The letters of *Infinite Jest* are obscured by some of the clouds, and their color is a royal blue, a few shades darker than the background. By obscuring portions of the letters behind the clouds, Steve Snider, the designer, signified that the novel itself was not as important as the author. This was further enforced through Snider’s use of black letters when spelling out “David Foster Wallace.” His name took up over a third of the cover and was not blocked by clouds. Little, Brown pointed potential readers to the author first by having Wallace’s name appear as the focal point. Also, the red letters used to identify him as the “Author of *The*

²⁶⁸ Lipsky, 95.

²⁶⁹ See figure 1. Steve Snider, jacket designer, and Rod Currie/Tony Stone Images, jacket photograph, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996).

²⁷⁰ Lipsky, 95-96.

Broom of the System” played on his first novel’s cult status and the early declarations of his literary genius. This feature of the cover’s text was significantly smaller than the title and Wallace’s name, but the use of red pulled the potential consumer’s eye toward it. These typographic features revealed Wallace’s importance as an author and marketed him to a wider audience.

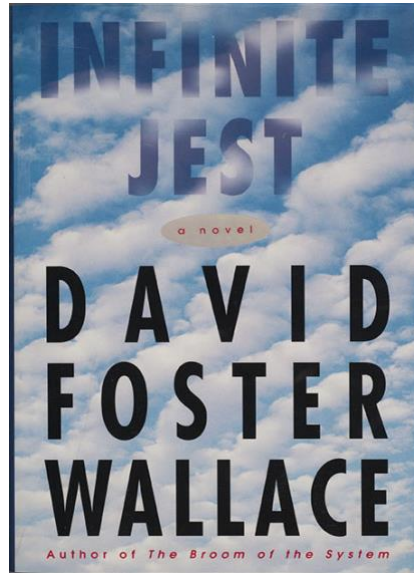


Fig. 1: Front cover, Steve Snider, designer, and Rod Currie/Tony Stone Images, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), image courtesy of the *Harry Ransom Center* at the University of Texas-Austin.

The use of sky and clouds added symbolic value to the promotion of Wallace. The name soaring in the clouds implied that he was, as Kakutani stated in her *New York Times* review, “one of the big talents of his generation, a writer of virtuosic talents who can seemingly do anything.”²⁷¹ This image of Wallace as an authorial figure who possessed great skill and genius-level talents firmly cast him as a larger than life figure, an author with untapped potential. Walter Kirn, in *New York Magazine*, compared his authorship to as if “Paul Bunyan had joined the NFL

²⁷¹ Kakutani.

or Wittgenstein had gone on *Jeopardy!*.”²⁷² Kakutani and Kirn’s proclamations, combined with the soaring typography on the cover, legitimized Wallace as a character of mythic proportions. He became, for many members of the literary world, an icon of Romantic genius. By focusing on these aspects of his authorship, Little, Brown’s cover and the many reviewers who promoted Wallace’s ability established a lasting representation.

The blurbs featured on the back cover added to this image.²⁷³ Five of the eight blurbs were from Wallace’s contemporaries—Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides, William Vollmann, Rick Moody, and Michael Childress.²⁷⁴ The commissioning of these writers was interesting because they were young writers at the time; they had yet to experience significant cultural or commercial success. Little, Brown placed Wallace among his peers, which allowed them to showcase the reverence that his generation had toward his work. Bourdieu stresses that new generations attempt to exert power within the field of cultural production to establish themselves as recognized members:

On one side are the dominant figures, who want continuity, identity, reproduction; on the other, the newcomers, who seek discontinuity, rupture, difference, revolution. To ‘make one’s name’ means making one’s *mark*, achieving recognition (in both senses of one’s *difference* from other producers, especially the most consecrated of them; at the same

²⁷² Walter Kirn, “Long Hot Novel,” *New York Magazine*, February 12, 1996, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.michaelfuchs.org/razorsedge/?story=2015-08-22>.

²⁷³ See figure 2: Steve Snider, designer, and Rod Currie/Tony Stone Images, jacket photograph, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), image courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas-Austin.

²⁷⁴ In *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, Wallace explains to Lipsky that he is against blurbing his friends because “it could be perceived as log-rolling,” and Wallace contends that Franzen’s blurb for *Infinite Jest* makes him “uncomfortable” (250). However, Wallace’s views must have changed after the Lipsky interview because he provided a blurb for Franzen’s *The Corrections* in 2001 calling the novel “a testament to the range and depth of pleasures great fiction affords.” In essence, Wallace “log-roll[ed]” for Franzen’s artistic credibility by declaring the novel a great artistic and cultural achievement.

time, it means *creating a new position* beyond the positions presently occupied *ahead* of them, in the *avant-garde*.²⁷⁵

For Bourdieu, the incoming generation of authors pushes against the generation before them, struggling to find their place in the field of cultural production, and it is through this “struggle” between social actors that new representations are produced.²⁷⁶ Eugenides reinforced this by claiming Wallace was an heir of “the high comic tradition” of Swift, Sterne, and Pynchon; however, Eugenides saw a difference between Wallace’s authorship and these forefathers when he ended the blurb exclaiming, ““He’s the man! He’s the man!””²⁷⁷ Moody reinforced Eugenides’s proclamation by stating, “David Foster Wallace reimagines the novel in *Infinite Jest*, and finds it, anew, a grand, monstrous, powerful thing.”²⁷⁸ Here the importance of Wallace’s authorship was given to the reader. Moody contended that Wallace was groundbreaking because he renewed the novel as an art form, much like Franzen’s blurb as well. It was through altering what the novel could achieve that Wallace as sacred genius found its most distinguishing trait.

²⁷⁵ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 106.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 40-43.

²⁷⁷ See figure 2: Steve Snider, designer, and Rod Currie/Tony Stone Images, jacket photograph, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), image courtesy of the *Harry Ransom Center* at the University of Texas-Austin. The use of patriarchal language here is intentional on my part because the back cover firmly establishes the historical dominance of the literary field by men. Eugenides’s list of male authors and Little, Brown’s use of only male contemporaries of Wallace for blurbs situates Wallace in the masculine tradition of writing. I believe these choices to be intentional on all parts because they work to establish Wallace’s brand within this historical tradition and establish the definition of the contemporary serious literary author as masculine.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

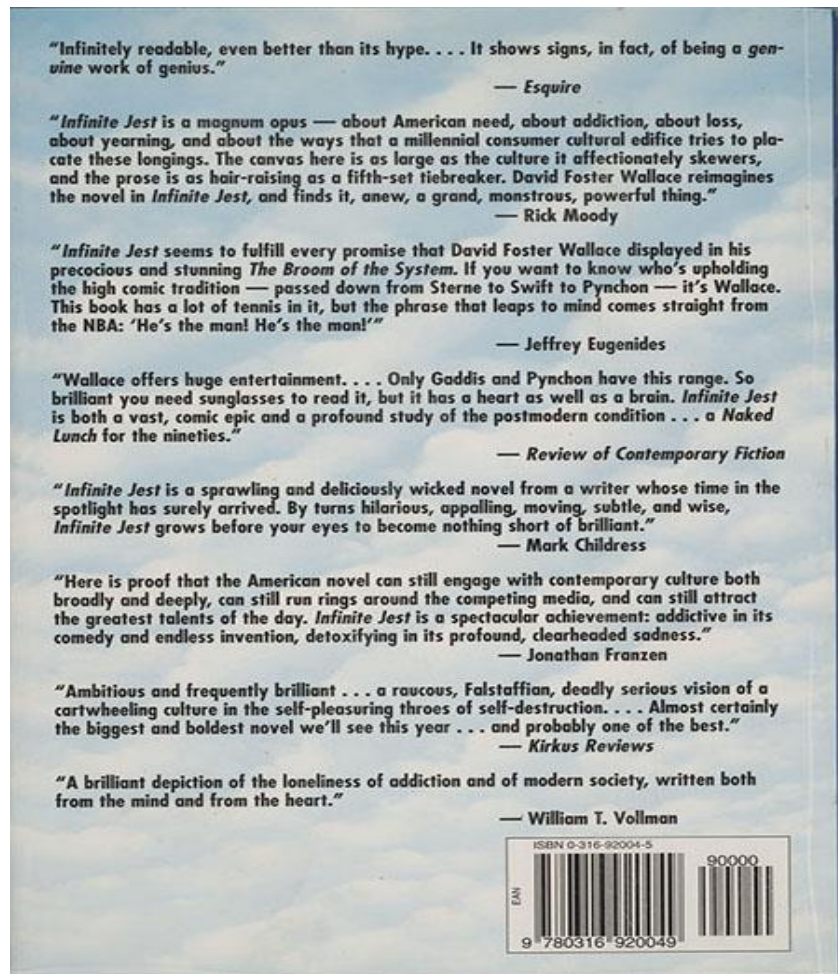


Fig. 2: Back cover, Steve Snider, designer, and Rod Currie/Tony Stone Images, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), image courtesy of the *Harry Ransom Center* at the University of Texas-Austin.

Wallace's reticence, during the promotion of *Infinite Jest*, harkened back to the tradition of the man of letters and gentleman amateur of the nineteenth-century. These conceptions of authorship asserted that artists should not be concerned with grubby commerce. Wallace associated his promotion with "being a whore."²⁷⁹ Although he compared it to prostitution, he conceded to Lipsky that even though he viewed himself as "avant-garde" the main goal of writing was to be read.²⁸⁰ He was conscious of the divide between his authorial identity and the

²⁷⁹ David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 90.

literary marketplace. He performed around the idea that serious literature had to make the audience work for their entertainment and that it was the writer's job to find new ways to make literature more appealing than other art forms.²⁸¹ At the same time, promoting his books was necessary to gain recognition. Wallace told Lipsky that his promotional appearances were done out of respect for his editor and publisher, but also out of knowledge that there was a tradeoff for having the book published. He wanted other books purchased, and he knew that "playing this delicate game" was part of literary culture.²⁸² Through his participation in interviews with publications ranging in prestige from *The New York Times* to *Salon* to *The Boston Phoenix*, Wallace sold his identity and work to a public the majority of so-called avant-gardists ignored.

Many publications continued this representation of him as an indifferent figure. He sought to look disinterested in the attention around him, and his appearance was a physical manifestation of this trait. Mark Caro, in the *Chicago Tribune*, found Wallace's appearance to be emblematic of his rebellion from the literary establishment: "The author...was wearing a yellow bandana around his head and a white T-shirt, and he abided the university's no-smoking rule...by stashing a clump of smokeless tobacco inside his lower lip and occasionally leaning behind his desk to spit the juice into a waste basket."²⁸³ Caro gave his audience a representation

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 31.

²⁸¹ Miller, 60-61. See also Anne Marie Donahue, "David Foster Wallace Winces..." in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (2012), 71. Here, Wallace discusses his aesthetic view that readers should be engaged with the art to come away feeling fulfilled.

²⁸² Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 18.

²⁸³ Mark Caro, "The Next Big Think: Can a Downstate Author Withstand the Sensation over His 1,079-Page Novel?," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 54.

of Wallace's casual nature and his resistance to altering his identity in the face of public recognition.

However, Laura Miller read his appearance as a creation of the promotional material surrounding *Infinite Jest* and not a true performance. Miller asserted that the "low-key, bookish appearance [Wallace portrayed during their interview] flatly contradicts the unshaven, bandanna-capped image advanced by his publicity photos."²⁸⁴ She established a difference between the author on the dust jacket and the man who wrote the novel, but also reinforced the idea that Wallace's public identity performance bore a bandana. In *Time*, a similar juxtaposition appeared. Sheppard stated, "Wallace may look like a carefree Frisbee player with his ponytail and head hankie, but he has the soul of an old-fashioned inkstained wretch."²⁸⁵ Sheppard romanticized Wallace's casual image by linking it to the historical figure of the author toiling away on his masterpiece in isolation. These depictions highlighted Wallace's rebellion from images of the professional author.

A bandana clad Romantic becomes the iconic depiction of Wallace. The descriptions offered in print about his appearance establish an image of him that must be met in order to have a successful performance. In essence, he becomes, what Joseph Roach calls, a *role-icon*. Roach states, "The role-icon represents a part that certain exceptional performers play on and off stage, no matter what other parts they enact from night to night."²⁸⁶ Not only do individuals become associated with certain social and fictional roles, but also clothing becomes "prop and

²⁸⁴ Miller, 58. See also Lorin Stein, "David Foster Wallace: In the Company of Creeps," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (2012), 89. Stein describes Wallace's appearance as a "little girlish and hard to synthesize."

²⁸⁵ Sheppard.

²⁸⁶ Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 39, accessed March 31, 2017, *ProQuest ebrary*.

performance,” according to Roach.²⁸⁷ Audiences expect consistency from performers and challenge any variation. Roach contends that consistency produces *habits*, which take the form of clothing, i.e. nuns’ habits or the repetition of acts of a ritual. He maintains that “the identity of the role-icon” is produced “by the performance of *habits*.”²⁸⁸ In this way, Wallace’s appearance and his acting as a genius establish a consistent version of the author. Max described him as a “*monster sacré* [sacred beast] in his iconoclastic outfits—bandana, beaten-up hiking shorts, and double athletic socks inside unlaced hiking boots.”²⁸⁹ This image fleshed out Wallace’s character traits. These descriptions place him in the role of the true artist, whose clothing states as much about his identity as the art he produces. Upholding this image becomes part of Wallace’s performance, as well as the job of other mediators.

Wallace’s style took on a myth of its own. According to Bruni, his image and, ultimately, celebrity “was predictable and painstakingly engineered” by his editor Michael Pietsch. The promotion of *Infinite Jest*, but more specifically Wallace as author, hinged on his ability to consistently perform the image circulating in promotional materials. According to Bruni, this was successful:

And Wallace—wittingly or unwittingly—has served it [the promotion] well, projecting the perfect measure of aloofness, particularly in his appearance, which flouts conventional vanity in a manner that doth protest perhaps a bit too much. He often wears a bandana wrapped tightly around his head, as if to avoid combing his shoulder-length hair and to coddle his febrile mind. His wire-rimmed glasses, stubble of beard and hole-ridden sweaters lend him the aspect of a doctoral candidate so deep in thought that he cannot afford the time or energy for grooming.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 88.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 92-94.

²⁸⁹ D.T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012), 271.

²⁹⁰ Bruni.

The words *coddle* and *febrile* confirmed the prevailing image of Wallace as a delicate yet passionate thinker, and the last lines alluded to the grunge aesthetic of the early to mid-nineties. Max discussed how Bruni and other *New York Times* journalists cast Wallace as the literary equivalent of Kurt Cobain. Max did not deny that there were similarities in how each cultural figure had “an allergy to façades [and] to disco-type slickness” and how they both wore the “uniform for anyone who felt disenchanted with the post-Reagan American culture of buying and owning.”²⁹¹ By uniform, Max refers to the style of clothing and accessories each cultural figure donned during their public performances—an anti-style style that flew in the face of corporate America.

Much of what the audience read about Wallace during this time was considered by some to be an intricate attempt to construct literary celebrity through the manipulation of the author as sacred genius. He admitted to Lipsky that the choice to use “David Foster Wallace” as his *nom de plume* was made by his agent Bonnie Nadell and her boss Fred Hill when he signed with their agency. “Foster” was his mother’s maiden name, and Nadell and Hill thought using it would create enough difference between him and David Raines Wallace.²⁹² The name was, as Lipsky mused, “overflowing” because “you had to say all three parts.”²⁹³ Wallace’s name alluded to the

²⁹¹ Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story*, 221.

²⁹² Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 265. See also David Lipsky, “The Lost Years and Days of David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (2012), 167. See also Lev Grossman, “The Death of a Genius,” *Time*, September 29, 2008. In *The Pale King* (2011), Wallace comments on his “*nom de plume*” in footnote forty-eight of Chapter Twenty-four. Wallace asserts that “you’re more or less stuck with it [the public authorial name], no matter how alien or pretentious it sounds to you in your everyday life” (295). Wallace’s metafictional take on his name shows how his public authorial identity clashed with his private identity as “Dave” or “David.” Becoming “David Foster Wallace” and having it printed gives permanence to it in the literary marketplace.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, xxix.

tradition of nineteenth-century American authors with three names, like Edgar Allen Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. In this manner, the name bridged American literary history. His name deepened his association with tradition because it functioned as a sign of genius.

I want to pause to make the obvious statement that Wallace never completed another novel while living; however, he did complete other works. His nonfiction allows for a glimpse at another side of his authorship. For Max, Wallace's nonfiction persona "was like listening to your best friend in grad school, tirelessly willing to absorb, reason, confront, embrace but never accept."²⁹⁴ Establishing a parallel authorial identity with his nonfiction allowed him to extend his image. The identity Wallace enacted in his nonfiction did not sacrifice his concern with the state of literary culture, nor did it eschew the casting of him as a sacred genius.

After *Infinite Jest*, the term genius became heavily associated with him. Tom Scocca opened his 1998 interview by claiming that what made Wallace such a renowned fiction writer made him a highly successful nonfiction writer: "But the humor and intellectual deftness that made the thirty-five-year-old Wallace a hot young property in the world of literary novels—he won a MacArthur 'genius' grant last year, and the words *virtuosity* and *brilliance* tend to tumble across his blurb pages—also make him a captivating reporter."²⁹⁵ Scocca's mentioning of Wallace's MacArthur award justified his nonfiction because it came from the same prestigious individual. Wallace, however, considered the grant a further indictment of the literary marketplace and his role as "a high-level entertainer who could be bought by... 'the blow jobs the

²⁹⁴ Max, 228.

²⁹⁵ Tom Scocca, "David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 82.

culture gives out.”²⁹⁶ Once again, he pushed against the establishment by denigrating the prestige of such an award, something many writers work their entire careers for. Scocca’s use of the award as praise and Wallace’s snarky interpretation do not clash; they reveal his consistent attempts to align his authorial performance with the Romantic idea of posterity.

His ability to write at the highest levels in multiple genres validated his image as a genius. He was highly conscious of his authorial identity, and his nonfiction was a way to play with it. He admitted to creating a persona “a little stupider and schmuckier than” the identity he performed in other genres, which seemed to humanize his “genius.”²⁹⁷ He never claimed to be a journalist, and he continually thought of himself primarily as a fiction writer even as his nonfiction received increasing attention.²⁹⁸ However, Wallace’s nonfiction allowed him to access a wider audience, thus gaining the recognition he desired. Lipsky contended that “the difference between the fiction and the nonfiction reads as the difference between Wallace’s social self and his private self.”²⁹⁹ The two are not as different as Lipsky believed. Wallace maintains consistent traits across genres. The main difference between the two is that the nonfiction writer is more up

²⁹⁶ Max, 239.

²⁹⁷ David Lipsky, “The Lost Years and Last Days of David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 173. See also David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 41-42.

²⁹⁸ Scocca, 83. See also, Charlie Rose, “David Foster Wallace,” *CharlieRose.com*, 32:31, March 27, 1997. Wallace also made note of this during two appearances on *Bookworm*: see Michael Silverblatt, “David Foster Wallace: A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again,” May 15, 1997 and “David Foster Wallace: Consider the Lobster and Other Essays,” March 2, 2006. All three appearances coincided with the publication and promotion of new collections of nonfiction.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

front with the audience about his literary games and the ever-present self-consciousness around his representation.

Originally published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*'s fall 1988 issue, "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young" was collected posthumously in *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (2012). Here, Wallace took on what it meant to be an avant-garde author against the backdrop of an ever more commercially oriented culture. Similar to his descriptions in "E Unibus Pluram," he set out a definition of authorship. He asserted, "Most good fiction writers, even young ones, are intellectuals."³⁰⁰ Performing as a representative of sacred genius, Wallace counteracted the reliance on more popular, or lesser, forms of literature and art: "The writer of trash fiction, often with admirable craft, affords his customer a narrative structure and movement, and content that *engages* the reader—titillates, repulses, excites, transports him—without demanding of him any of the intellectual or spiritual or *artistic* responses that render verbal intercourse between writer and reader an important or even *real* activity."³⁰¹ To him, these writers were merely "[e]ntertainers," and "only artists can transfigure" society.³⁰² Wallace framed the meaning of authorship into that of an innovative genius, but his concession to the "admirable craft" of these "trash fiction" writers connected all forms of authorship through the professional traits of skill and workmanship. All writers, for Wallace, have skill; it is serious authors who shape culture, however.

The concession revealed Wallace's conflict over the author's role. He made it clear that "[c]onfusion" was a trait of contemporary authorship because authors must compete in a larger

³⁰⁰ David Foster Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not: Essays* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013), 44.

³⁰¹ Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not*, 54.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 53.

marketplace and media environment to gain attention.³⁰³ He placed Bret Easton Ellis and other members of The Brat Pack firmly inside commercial literary culture because they sought celebrity. Wallace, in turn, removed the conflict present in his and similar authors' performances by claiming that the "power" art held within the imagination of many individuals justified a lack of economic and celebrity success.³⁰⁴ This was a direct reference to Romantic authorship. By associating his authorial performance with the Romantic tradition, Wallace established that he was a true author because art was valuable regardless of what the marketplace thought.

This theme becomes a prominent part of his nonfiction, and he uses it to distance his performances of the author as sacred genius from the performances of previous generations. Published in the *New York Observer* on October 13, 1997 and collected in *Consider the Lobster* (2006), "Certainly the End of *Something* or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think" took aim at the generation of postwar American authors such as Norman Mailer, John Updike, and Philip Roth. Wallace called these three specifically "the Great Male Narcissists."³⁰⁵ He contended that these authors had an "uncritical celebration" of themselves through their fiction, and he interpreted this as a weakness in their art.³⁰⁶

Underlying this critical take was Wallace's role in the literary world. As a member of a new generation of writers, he had to establish himself, and that meant taking shots, and sometimes cheap-shots, at the previous generation. His review of Updike's *Toward the End of Time* showed that his standard was extremely high and that he had no time for authors "going

³⁰³ Ibid., 66.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 68.

³⁰⁵ David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2007), 51.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 53.

through the motions,” no matter their cultural status.³⁰⁷ He equated this lack of creativity with the effects of the market and the established author’s need to fulfill demand. This critique, coupled with his rising literary celebrity, gave him the clout needed to affect the interpretation of authorship. Even though he vaguely respected Updike, Wallace presented his authorial identity as more significant because he reluctantly participated in the literary marketplace.³⁰⁸

Championing innovative literature and decrying the formulaic, Wallace showed that serious literature should not be controlled by commercialism, and that true authors, like himself, created lasting art instead of disposable products.

Representation through art concerns Wallace because he equates authorial performance with the work’s reception. In “The Nature of Fun,” which was originally published in *Fiction Writer* (1998), then collected in *Why I Write: Thoughts on the Craft of Fiction* (Little, Brown 1998), and posthumously collected in *Both Flesh and Not* (2012), he addressed the pressure writers experience when entering the literary world. He cited DeLillo to describe how authorship was like being a parent to “a kind of hideously damaged infant.”³⁰⁹ Wallace valued this metaphor because a sense of imperfection in any piece of writing always existed.³¹⁰ According to Wallace, writers assumed that the work was a representation of them, and the audience’s reception created images of the author in public. He asserted that the issues in the work were “a devastating indictment of *you*” because “if you were a better fiction writer” the flaws would be absent and

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 54.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 52.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 193.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 193.

the work would be beautiful.³¹¹ He contended that authors attempted to “fool people” into accepting the work as “perfect.”³¹² The illusion of perfection and the performance caused the writer to experience a shift from writing for the joy of art to writing to please the public, something he found highly troubling. In this case, writing is no longer fun; it becomes a trying task. Wallace believed that “[t]his results in shitty fiction,” which must be discarded because it inaccurately represented the author.³¹³ The image he created of the author in “The Nature of Fun” taps into the historical pressure authors experience. The way works identify and affect their public images creates high levels of self-consciousness, which diminishes the writer’s ability to create significant art.

Stripping fun from the act of writing and being an author takes its toll. The continuous concern with representation and how one appears removes the mental focus necessary for Wallace as sacred genius to write effectively. The added pressure of the public performance became another anxiety he expressed through print. He told Chris Wright of the *Boston Phoenix* in 1999, “All writers want everybody to love them.”³¹⁴ Although he stated this, Wallace believed he had to accept the small audience he had accumulated and that the high art aesthetic had “lost touch with the fun” of writing.³¹⁵ These admissions reveal his turmoil. His books after *Infinite Jest* did not bring him the same levels of attention, which caused him to recognize that having a

³¹¹ Ibid., 194.

³¹² Ibid., 195.

³¹³ Ibid., 197-198.

³¹⁴ Chris Wright, “Mischief: A Brief Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 102.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 102.

small audience was better than having no audience. The desire to have an audience accept him clashes with his previous declarations regarding the reader's submission to the author. The reverse actually occurs since Wallace loses control of his authorial identity through publication. He had always desired control over his representations, and he told Lipsky that the lack of control he had over his image in print was "*extremely* disturbing."³¹⁶ Wallace claimed the reason was "[b]ecause I want to be able to try and shape and manage the impression of me that's coming across."³¹⁷ Pleasing the audience was not something he wanted to do, and his staunch role as an uncompromising genius affected how he was depicted. The control Wallace exerted over his identity as a sacred genius, ultimately, worked through his final performative act.

His suicide on September 12, 2008 shocked the literary world. Major publications remembered him and his literary contributions. Almost all of these pieces expressed deep sadness at the loss of such a tremendous talent; a few focused, however, on erecting an icon of Wallace. Lev Grossman's "The Death of the Genius," in *Time*, opened by claiming that "Wallace seemed to have no earthly constraint" when it came to writing.³¹⁸ Grossman's language functioned as an allusion to the author as Romantic genius. His title and memorial consecrated Wallace by making him a figure beyond his time and place. In *The New Yorker*, Deborah Treisman defined him as "a throwback to another time—when the romantic vision of the writer was of a recluse, living far from the capital, struggling through his manuscript in the privacy of

³¹⁶ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 18.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

³¹⁸ Lev Grossman, "The Death of a Genius," *Time*, September 29, 2008: 63, accessed March 10, 2017, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost, <http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,url,cookie,uid&db=a9h&AN=34428431&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

his own study, and emerging years later with a masterpiece.”³¹⁹ Treisman’s description linked him to this Romantic image and served as proof to his depiction as a sacred genius. Wallace’s hyperbolic acts were necessary parts of his identity, and he consciously appeared as a sacred genius.

Two pieces published in *The New York Times* at this time contextualized Wallace for an even larger audience. In her reflection on his body of work, Kakutani called him “[a] prose magician” and an author who exhibited a tremendous talent across multiple genres.³²⁰ She found his fiction to be good but not his best work; she found his nonfiction presented audiences with a more controlled author and “reminded the reader of Mr. Wallace’s copious gifts as a writer and his keen sense of the metastasizing absurdities of life in America at a precarious hinge moment in time.”³²¹ In a similar vein, A.O. Scott considered Wallace an exemplar of the “anxieties and attitudes of his generation” and a figure whose disinterestedness in literary celebrity made him “cooler than everyone else.”³²² Again, both Kakutani and Scott echoed the traits that followed Wallace, that of the voice of a generation. However, Scott presented Wallace as a media creation as well. He claimed “that Mr. Wallace’s persona—at once unbearably sophisticated and hopelessly naïve, infinitely knowing and endlessly curious—will be his most durable

³¹⁹ Deborah Treisman, “David Foster Wallace,” *The New Yorker*, September 29, 2008, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/09/29/david-foster-wallace>.

³²⁰ Michiko Kakutani, “Exuberant Riffs on a Land Run Amok,” *The New York Times*, September 14, 2008, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/15/books/15kaku.html?action=click&contentCollection=Books&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article>.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² A.O. Scott, “The Best Mind of His Generation,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2008, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21scott.html>.

creation.”³²³ This assertion showed that although Wallace would be remembered for his body of work, his authorial identity far surpassed any of his other creations.

In the same manner, Wallace’s peers built him up as a sacred genius after his death. Most notably Don DeLillo, his literary idol, and his long-time friend Jonathan Franzen eulogized him as an exemplar of sacred genius. Wallace was continually considered an heir to DeLillo, and the two authors corresponded numerous times over the course of Wallace’s life.³²⁴ In his eulogy, DeLillo praised Wallace’s ability to construct “sentences that shoot rays of energy in seven directions” and his desire “to be equal to the vast, babbling, spinout sweep of contemporary culture.”³²⁵ DeLillo cast Wallace as truly “American,” placing him firmly within the historical tensions of American authorship.

Franzen glorified but also critiqued Wallace’s authorial identity performance and his iconic status in a more nuanced manner than DeLillo. Franzen’s eulogy presented Wallace as a Romantic figure with tremendous talent, much like the tributes in major publications. However, he humanized his friend by describing the depression that led to his suicide.³²⁶ He showed a

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Collected in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, edited by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012) are transcripts from Wallace’s Memorial Service in New York on October 23, 2008. Included are eulogies from Don DeLillo, George Saunders, and Jonathan Franzen. For my purposes, I use Franzen’s eulogy published in his collection *Farther Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012) entitled “David Foster Wallace.” See also D.T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012). The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas-Austin holds Don DeLillo’s correspondence, which contains letters from Wallace.

³²⁵ Don DeLillo, “Informal Remarks from the David Foster Wallace Memorial Service in New York on October 23, 2008,” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, eds. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 23-24.

³²⁶ Franzen, *Farther Away*, 163-168. Franzen spends a significant portion of the essay discussing his feelings regarding Wallace’s final bouts with severe depression, and he describes the effects certain treatments had on Wallace. Through this move, much like Max in his

more relatable image of Wallace than the genius often portrayed in the media. This Wallace suffered and dealt with mental issues like many individuals, while at the same time creating extraordinary literature.

Wallace as sacred genius troubled Franzen, and he used his position as a prominent literary author to address Wallace's desire to perform in this manner. Regarding Wallace, Franzen stated in *The Paris Review*, "I perceived, rightly or wrongly, that our friendship was haunted by a competition between the writer who was pursuing art for art sake and the writer who was trying to be out in the world."³²⁷ Franzen saw Wallace's aspiration as one of the impetuses for how he performed and ultimately chose to end his life. In "Farther Away," he used Wallace's death as an excuse to reassess his own relationship to writing, art, and life, but most importantly to work through Wallace's role as an author and a friend. Franzen mentioned, "The people who knew Dave least well are most likely to speak of him in saintly terms."³²⁸ Through writing, he reconciled his private knowledge of Wallace with the publicly performed sacred genius. These two identities were problematic, and Franzen believed that Wallace was highly conscious of his perception. He, correctly, pointed out the difference between the performance and the actual person. Publishing this was an attempt to collapse the two identities into one. Literary culture's representation of Wallace became for Franzen, what Bennett calls, "a back-formation or 'retrojection.'"³²⁹ Instead of valuing him while alive, Wallace was appreciated posthumously, removing much of the human "ambiguity and ambivalence" from the author's

biography, Franzen provides the audience with an inside look at Wallace's unhealthy mental state and the tolls it took on him, his loved ones, and his ability to write.

³²⁷ Burn, "Jonathan Franzen, The Art of Fiction No. 207."

³²⁸ Franzen, *Farther Away*, 39.

³²⁹ Bennett, 71.

identity.³³⁰ Although he took issue with the Romantic depictions of him, Franzen interpreted Wallace's suicide as a way to secure his place as an icon of sacred genius.

Franzen's friendship with Wallace allowed him access to aspects of his identity that the public did not have, but their friendship clouded Franzen's ability to objectively comprehend Wallace's suicide:

I imagine the side of David that advocated going the Kurt Cobain route speaking in the seductively reasonable voice of the devil in *The Screwtape Letters*, which was one of David's favorite books, and pointing out that death by his own hand would simultaneously satisfy his loathsome hunger for career advantage and, because it would represent a capitulation to the side of himself that his embattled better side perceived as evil, further confirm the justice of his death sentence.³³¹

His knowledge of the deep conflict Wallace expressed toward authorship and celebrity allowed him to judge the decision. Franzen's critique led him to see it as both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, Wallace obtained a level of recognition he desired, while on the other hand, he became what he supposedly hated. Ultimately, Franzen accepted the Romantic image of Wallace: "David had chosen to leave the people who loved him and give himself to the world of the novel and its readers, and I was ready to wish him well in it."³³² The shift from "Dave" to "David" shows Franzen conceding to the prevailing identity. This legitimizes the iconic status of Wallace, and it paves the way for posthumous recognition to further support the author as scared genius.

The iconic image of David Foster Wallace in print is of an author deeply concerned with representation. He and other mediators have erected a "literary statue" that places him firmly within the Romantic tradition of authorship, and as Max also contends, this image feeds on the

³³⁰ Franzen, *Farther Away*, 43.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

³³² *Ibid.*, 48.

“complicated interplay between writer and public.”³³³ It is the conflict between Wallace’s values and the literary marketplace that establishes this image of his authorship. The audience is left with, what Roach calls, an *afterimage*. *Afterimages* are not tangible; they are “traces left behind by the It-Effect.”³³⁴ Roach defines having “It” as “the power of apparently effortless embodiment of contradictory qualities simultaneously.”³³⁵ Wallace’s authorial performance fits into Roach’s definition because Wallace desires both artistic legitimacy and public attention. Through the clash of these two ideals, Wallace’s performance of the author as sacred genius is “threaten[ed]” and “seduc[ed]” by literary celebrity.³³⁶ Even though peers like Franzen have attempted to contextualize the private and the public identities, Wallace’s lasting presence rests firmly on the base of Romantic genius and his conscious desire to be seen as a significant literary figure.

His audio/visual performances further illuminate this conflict. Even though his print appearances outnumber his audio/visual ones, the performances that do occur reveal Wallace as a savvy manipulator of audio/visual media. In these media, Wallace physically performs as a sacred genius. This physical act adds life to Wallace’s representation.

Audio/Visual Signification

Wallace’s attempts to control his image led to new levels of anxiety in his audio/visual presences. Mirroring the tradition of authors being skeptical of visual media and its cultural

³³³ Max, 240.

³³⁴ Roach, 91. See also Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*. London: Pluto Press, 2000. Accessed January 12, 2017. *ProQuest ebrary*.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

power, he postured himself against over-exposure, selectively choosing appearances that might support his authorial identity. Radio became an alternative medium that allowed him to perform for an intellectual audience, playing off the medium's cultural prestige, in Bourdieu's terms. While he appeared on radio more than in visual media like photography and television, Wallace strategically used both to disseminate his sacred genius image.

Wallace felt his photographs were “appalling” because he “wish[ed] that wasn't what [he] looked like.”³³⁷ This led him to limit photographs in his media presences.³³⁸ Unlike other authors who provide a new picture with each new work, Wallace used the same one for multiple works, and even after his death, many of the reissues and anniversary editions use the same photograph. These pictures present the iconic image—the bandana and glasses wearing, long haired, scruffy author. This mirrored the descriptions of him in print, but a divergence emerged around the publication of his short story collection *Oblivion* (2004) and his nonfiction collection *Consider the Lobster* (2005). These author portraits cast Wallace against type, establishing another visual representation of his authorial identity along the lines of all-American ruggedness. However, the iconic version overrode these images, relegating them to secondary representations.

The author portrait for *Infinite Jest* began the iconic image of Wallace. It was not new at the time of novel's publication; Bob Mahoney took it in 1992, four years before *Infinite Jest* was published. At the time it was taken, Wallace's reputation rested on his categorization as a Postmodernist genius. It showed Wallace deep in thought.³³⁹ Positioning him in this manner,

³³⁷ Bruni.

³³⁸ Arden, 95.

³³⁹ See figure 3: author photograph, Bob Mahoney, photographer, from *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996).

Mahoney established the idea that Wallace was an author consumed by his art. The downcast eyes and focus on something unseen gave him the air of disinterestedness present in Romantic authorship.

Along with these elements, Mahoney photographed Wallace in what would become his iconic attire—the bandana. His long hair framed his face from underneath the accessory. This draws the viewer’s attention to the eyes and mouth, which display a concentrated countenance and deep attention to his work, romanticizing his devotion to writing. The bandana signifies Wallace’s difference from professional conceptions of authorship. Arden described Wallace’s appearance as “the very picture of his age—an unshaven young man lost in thought, a bandana wrapped around his long hair like a bandage protecting a head wound.”³⁴⁰ Wallace comes across as artistic, and it creates the illusion of a lack of attention toward his visual appearance when it is highly constructed. This Romantic image fuels other visual performances.



Fig. 3: Author photograph, Bob Mahoney, from *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), image courtesy of the *Harry Ransom Center* at the University of Texas-Austin.

³⁴⁰ Arden, 94.

As part of the hype around *Infinite Jest*, Wallace appeared in *Time* on February 19, 1996. The brief feature provided photographs of him at his home in Bloomington, Illinois.³⁴¹ The cultural capital of an appearance in *Time* went beyond the small recognition he experienced prior to *Infinite Jest*, and the photographs accompanying the piece introduced this larger general audience to his authorial identity as a sacred genius. On appearing in *Time*, Wallace told Lipsky “that’s a whole different fucking level” because it meant he had reached a significant place of cultural recognition.³⁴² Unlike the author portrait for *Infinite Jest*, the *Time* pictures made Wallace look intimidating. He wore a black turtleneck, dark jeans, glasses, and a white bandana. His hands were in his pockets, and he stared directly at the camera, confronting the viewer’s invasion of his space. The lighting reinforced the mystique around Wallace and the Romantic author. The room was backlit by a single lamp without a shade and the filtered light from the French doors directly behind him. This created heavy shadows and a halo effect around his body, accentuating the bandana’s whiteness. The image strengthens Wallace’s aura as a sacred genius by making him appear other worldly and distanced from society.



Fig. 4: Wallace at home in 1996, Gary Hannabarger/Corbis, photographer, from “Mad Maximalism” by R.Z. Sheppard, *Time*, February 19, 1996.

³⁴¹ See figure 4: Wallace at home in 1996, Gary Hannabarger/Corbis, photographer, from “Mad Maximalism” by R.Z. Sheppard, *Time*, February 19, 1996.

³⁴² Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 297.

Wallace began his forays into audio media with his appearances on public radio at the same time as he appeared visually across publications. In an interview on *The Leonard Lopate Show* for New York Public Radio, Lopate opened by stating that “genius gets used quite a bit” when discussing Wallace.³⁴³ Similar to print publications, Lopate wanted to characterize Wallace’s most prominent image. His characterization created anxiety in Wallace’s performance because he became concerned with his audible representation. His cadence and language were obtuse, often making his ideas unclear. This concerned him because he believed clarity strengthened his performance as a genius; if listeners could not understand him, he wasn’t as intelligent as he had been portrayed. In fact, his concerns were not unwarranted. Like he did in print, Wallace wanted the same control over his audio image. Appearing on *Bookworm*, hosted by Michael Silverblatt, Wallace expressed similar concerns over how he sounded. He asked continually, “Does that make any sense?”³⁴⁴ He wanted to make sure his remarks were perceived as “smart or coherent,” reinforcing his view that “the point of fiction [was] to show that the writer [was] very smart.”³⁴⁵ The intelligence of the writer in Wallace’s interpretation was a direct representation of the author’s identity, and it was this belief that Wallace tried to maintain across his authorial performances.

The audience for his fiction shifted with the publication of *Infinite Jest*, bringing about the attention of the mainstream, and he had to reassess how he enacted his authorial identity for

³⁴³ Leonard Lopate, “David Foster Wallace,” *The Leonard Lopate Show*, New York Public Radio, March 4, 1996, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.wnyc.org/story/56878-david-foster-wallace/>.

³⁴⁴ Michael Silverblatt, “David Foster Wallace: *Infinite Jest*,” *Bookworm*, KCRW, April 11, 1996, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/david-foster-wallace-infinite-jest>.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

this type of audience. Wallace explained to Lopate, “My ideal reader is somebody who likes to read and is willing to, at least for a while, to give the author the benefit of the doubt.”³⁴⁶ Stating this on a public radio program directed it toward his intended audience as opposed to a mass one. His statement was coy because it vaguely answered Lopate’s question, and it showed he did not want to exclude potential readers/consumers from his works. Stating that his works were for people who like to read and give control to the author implied that everyone was a potential reader, but Wallace’s platform for disseminating this view restricted it to a sympathetic audience.

Television, on the other hand, was an even more stressful platform for Wallace because of its association with mass culture and advertising commercialism. In Bruni’s *New York Times* article, Wallace stated, “When I won’t do things like appear on network television, it’s not because I have a lot of integrity.”³⁴⁷ He followed this by admitting that television audiences were not his intended audience and that appearing there would “turn off exactly the people whose approval [he’s] most hungry for.”³⁴⁸ Similar to Franzen’s claims regarding Oprah, Wallace implied that his intended audience was one that valued serious literature. These views did not apply to more culturally prestigious television, however. *Charlie Rose* provided Wallace the platform that met his standards for intellectualism. His first appearance was on the episode “Future of American Fiction,” which featured a panel of him, Jonathan Franzen, and Mark Leyner. Wallace’s aversion to television was eased by the presence of Franzen.³⁴⁹ The inclusion of his friend allowed him to divert some of the attention away from himself, but he focused the

³⁴⁶ Lopate.

³⁴⁷ Bruni.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Kirkpatrick.

audience toward him by challenging the panelists. Wallace snidely critiqued Franzen's views on commercialism and art by highlighting how Franzen ignored the reader's role.³⁵⁰ This response seems hypocritical compared to the claims Wallace made on *Bookworm* and *The Leonard Lopate Show*. After he interrupted Franzen, the camera cut to Wallace. He had a contemplative smirk on his face, signifying his pleasure in chiding his friend.

Later in the show, Wallace urged Franzen to "enlighten" him regarding Franzen's comments that people who read serious fiction were "not of the mainstream" and were "defined...by their non-participation in mass entertainments."³⁵¹ The camera showed Wallace as he interjected. He moved his shoulders and his expression became one of playful competition as he spoke. He smirked before the camera cut back to Franzen who appeared flustered. His response to Franzen's statement reinforced his stance on making high art accessible to a wider audience. He contended that the avant-garde should not be insular and directed toward "critics and college teachers and Ph.D. students."³⁵² Unlike Franzen, Wallace had experienced acclaim, and it was this taste of success that forced him to reconsider how the author and literature operated an environment of anti-intellectualism inside the U.S., especially on television.

This appearance on *Charlie Rose* provided Wallace with a platform to perform his authorial identity against those of his peers visually. He dressed casually in a black polo shirt, jeans, and no bandana, which contrasted the more professional appearances of Leyner, in a suit and tie, and Franzen, in a dress shirt and blazer. Wallace's clothes stood out, highlighting his disinterestedness in dressing up his appearance. His attire stayed consistent with his other visual

³⁵⁰ Charlie Rose, "Future of American Fiction."

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid.

presences, sans bandana. The way he dressed rebelled against the standard author attire for television appearances that Franzen and Leyner wore. Wallace's clothes, in turn, contradicted his speech acts, bringing to the forefront his performance of the author as sacred genius. He spoke passionately, but he downplayed his intellectualism, making it more personable and relatable than Leyner and Franzen who oftentimes sounded elitist. By dressing down, he broke the viewer's expectations, but his speech counteracted his appearance by highlighting his intense feelings for his art and its reception.

Extending Wallace's representation as a sacred genius was the author portrait accompanying *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (1997). The image played on the characteristic features of Wallace's visual identity. Unlike the ones for *Infinite Jest* and *Time*, this was a semi-candid shot of Wallace dressed in a dark winter coat, scarf, and stocking hat, standing in a snow-covered field.³⁵³ His attire, again, mirrored the grunge aesthetic of the nineties, rehashing the comparisons between him and Kurt Cobain. The trademark bandana was absent, but the stocking hat functioned similarly, assuming the same qualities as the original accessory. The oblique angle of the portrait visualized his difference from the mainstream, but it also revealed his conflict with performing the role of sacred genius, making the anxiety around his visual representation that much more stressful.

³⁵³ See figure 5: author photograph, Yael Routtenberg, photographer, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997).



Fig. 5: Author photograph, Yael Routtenberg, photographer, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997).

In Wallace's next television appearance, the conflict came into uncomfortable view. Appearing on *Charlie Rose* for a second time, his sacred genius was in the spotlight. This solo venture stripped him of the chance to defer to others; instead, he had to be the center of attention. Although he appeared to promote *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, the paperback edition of *Infinite Jest* had just been issued as well, causing Rose to question Wallace about the novel's effects on his authorship and place in the literary world. The Wallace that emerged from this performance was an author who seemed extremely uncomfortable and anxious.

This appearance was more along the lines of the iconic image that had taken shape—white bandana, long hair falling onto shoulders, and round glasses.³⁵⁴ Instead of the casual attire of his first appearance, he wore semi-formal clothes. His white dress shirt and burgundy tie conveyed professionalism, which fit with his nonfiction and journalism. However, the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up, the top button was open, and the tie was loose. These features mixed the messages his attire sent—was he professionally casual or casually professional?

³⁵⁴ See figure 6: David Foster Wallace grimacing, from Charlie Rose, "David Foster Wallace," CharlieRose.com, 32:31, March 27, 1997, accessed April 12, 2017. <https://charlierose.com/videos/23311>.

He was highly unsettled during the interview, highlighting his concern over his visual representation. Max described how the episode made Wallace “uncomfortable” because it was ironic “to be on TV talking about the power of TV.”³⁵⁵ During the entire thirty-minute interview, Wallace’s body language showed his discomfort: He fidgeted and moved around in the chair. He touched his face, grimaced, and bit his lower lip after many statements. He looked off-camera, looked down at his hands, and did not look at Rose directly very often. Rose sensed Wallace’s discomfort and tried to empathize, while also urging him to continue revealing himself.³⁵⁶

Wallace’s self-consciousness carried over into his interaction with Rose, causing him to critique Rose and the anxiety television created. After Rose asked him about his use of endnotes, Wallace became defensive and stated that their main purpose was “structural” and that he would “look pretentious talking about this” on television.³⁵⁷ Rose tersely declared, “Quit worrying about how you’re going to look and just be!” Wallace retorted by describing his concern over his public image: “I have got news for you. Coming on a television show stimulates your ‘What am I going to look like?’ gland like no other experience. You may now be such a veteran that you’re, like, you don’t notice anymore. You confront your own vanity when you think about going on TV. So, I’m, no apologies, but just that’s an explanation.”³⁵⁸

³⁵⁵ Max, 229.

³⁵⁶ See figure 6: David Foster Wallace grimacing, from Charlie Rose, “David Foster Wallace,” CharlieRose.com, 32:31, March 27, 1997, accessed April 12, 2017. <https://charlierose.com/videos/23311>. Rose makes his intentions for the interview clear by claiming that “what we’re trying to do here is just understand you [Wallace] by talking about things other than your work.”

³⁵⁷ Charlie Rose, “David Foster Wallace,” CharlieRose.com, 32:31, March 27, 1997, accessed April 12, 2017. <https://charlierose.com/videos/23311>.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.



Fig. 6: Wallace grimacing, from Charlie Rose, “David Foster Wallace,” CharlieRose.com, 32:31, March 27, 1997, accessed April 12, 2017. <https://charlierose.com/videos/23311>.

Later in the interview, Wallace, again, expressed concern over his representation by discussing literary celebrity and its effects on authorship. He alluded to the “fantasies” of greatness he believed all writers had. This desire created a conflict between the “nerd” and “shy” side of a person’s identity and the other side that was “the worst ham of all time.”³⁵⁹ Television reinforces the “ham” side of Wallace because the viewer sees his mannerisms and hears the cadence of his voice. His body language and voice are exaggerated, making it seem as though he is over-performing. This speech came toward the end of the interview and clashed with an earlier statement he made about his desire for “respect.” Wallace attempted to divert Rose’s question by explaining that all people want respect in some fashion and that he was no different in that regard. However, he admitted that “every writer dreams of having a lot of attention.” This statement illuminated his internal desire for literary celebrity.

As he accumulated clout the literary world, Wallace needed to become more marketable to his growing audience, especially in nonfiction. His performance of the author as sacred genius

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

had to be brought down to Earth, similar to Rose's efforts to break through Wallace's complexities during their interview. With the publication of the paperback edition of *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, Little, Brown and Wallace presented a different image of him. This author portrait was subsequently used for two other publications: the hardcover edition of the short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) and the paperback edition of the collection (2000). Unlike previous portraits, he did not wear a bandana or any other type of headwear, and he no longer wore the round glasses that had become part of his "look." The image from 1998 to 2000 was a more photogenic and handsome Wallace. His hair was pulled back from his face, but this was not the most jarring part. The most striking element was his smile.³⁶⁰ Even though it was a constructed, professional portrait, Wallace appeared at ease. In a *Publisher's Weekly* profile in 1999, Lorin Stein claimed, "In person, Wallace doesn't resemble his author photos" because he appeared "cheerful."³⁶¹ This revealed that the image published along with Wallace's works was not a direct representation of the person; the image was a depiction of the character he performed. The smile represents, possibly, a more "natural" version of Wallace than the contemplative expressions of his earlier author portraits. With the creation of a new image that became the standard for three publications, Wallace and Little, Brown disrupted the prevailing representation and presented a more marketable version of his sacred genius.

³⁶⁰ See figure 7: author photograph, Gary Hannabarger/Outline, photographer, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998); a black and white version appears on the dust jacket of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999) and the paperback edition (New York: Back Bay Books, 2000).

³⁶¹ Lorin Stein, "David Foster Wallace: In the Company of Creeps," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 89.



Fig. 7: Author photograph, Gary Hannabarger/Outline, photographer, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998); a black and white version appears on the dust jacket of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999) and the paperback edition (New York: Back Bay Books, 2000).

Another disruption of his image appeared in *The New Yorker*'s "The Future of American Fiction" issue. Here, Wallace can be seen laughing with his right arm raised above his head.³⁶² Similar to the *ASFT* author portrait, he did not wear a bandana. The photograph also caught a moment of his performance. Out of the six authors—Junot Díaz, Rick Moody, Edwidge Danicát, George Saunders, Jeffrey Eugenides, and him—featured in the photograph, Wallace over-performed excitement. By removing the seriousness that had become associated with his authorial identity and allowing him to "ham" up his performance, this image and the author portrait for *ASFT* rewrote the narrative around Wallace. His contemplative Romantic genius had given way to the enjoyment of literary stardom. He told Michael Silverblatt, in another appearance on *Bookworm*, that "the only difference between me and that author [the one who "imposes" his authorial identity on the audience] is that I am somewhat more cunning."³⁶³ The

³⁶² See figure 8: "The Future of American Fiction," Chris Callis, photographer, *The New Yorker* June 21, 1999.

³⁶³ Michael Silverblatt, "David Foster Wallace," *Bookworm*, KCRW, August 12, 1999, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/david-foster-wallace-5>.

statement showed his shrewdness toward pushing an identity into the audience's mind. Wallace performed a version of his authorial identity against the type that had been celebrated with this shift in his visual appearance. These images did not last, however. His next two books altered his visual image again, and like the previous author portraits, these were recycled across multiple publications until his death.

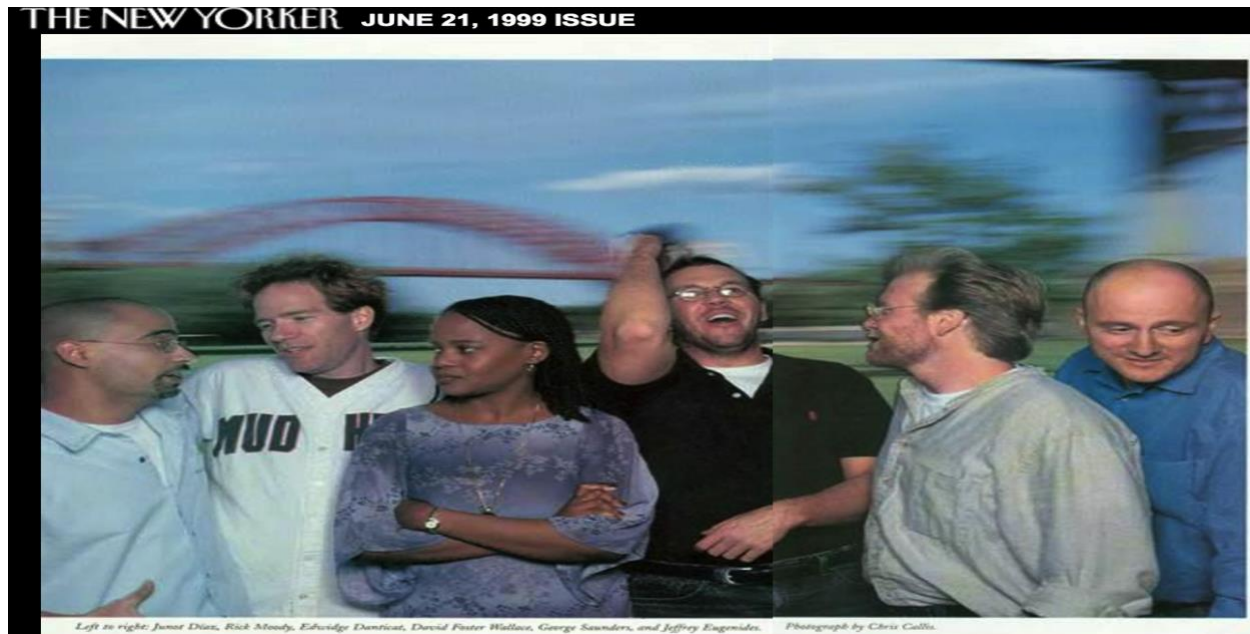


Fig. 8: “The Future of American Fiction,” Chris Callis, photographer, *The New Yorker* June 21, 1999.

The author portraits that appeared with *Oblivion* (2004) and *Consider the Lobster* (2006) presented Wallace as a hyper-masculine author. Both were shot in black-and-white, and like the images from the late-nineties and 2000, his signature bandana and glasses were absent. However, this was where the similarities ended. In the portrait for *Oblivion*, Wallace looked like a rugged individual, which taps into the depiction of authors as adventurous masculine individuals in the tradition of Hemingway and Mailer.³⁶⁴ One of his dogs sat in the foreground to his right and

³⁶⁴ See figure 9: Marion Ettlinger, photographer, image from *Oblivion* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2004).

stared at the camera. Wallace was middle ground surrounded by water bottles. A dog crate was at the back left. The setting was staged, but it lent a workman-like attitude to Wallace's authorship. His clothing strengthened this identity by depicting him in all denim and unlaced work boots. His gaze and posture challenged the viewer, unlike the warming smile of his previous author portrait. These elements presented Wallace's toughness, which visualized the difficulty of his writing and views on culture.

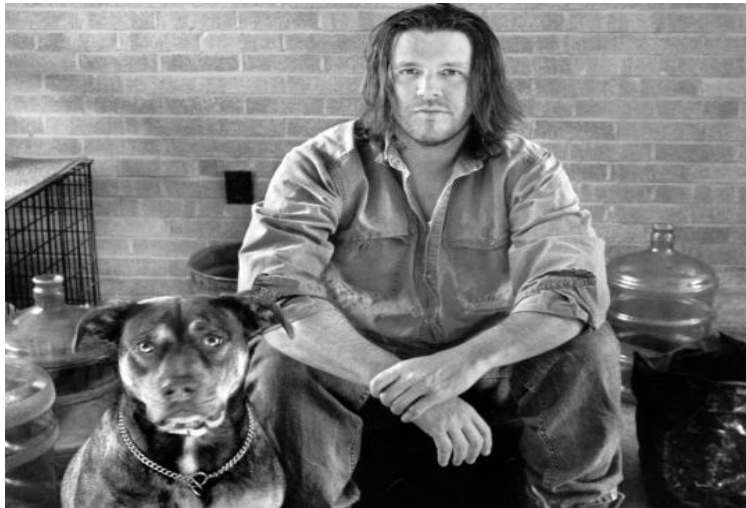


Fig. 9: author photograph, Marion Ettlinger, photographer, from *Oblivion* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2004).



Fig. 10: author photograph, Marion Ettlinger, photographer, from *Consider the Lobster* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2006).

Taken by Marion Ettlinger as well, the author portrait for *Consider the Lobster* maintained the rugged aesthetic from *Oblivion* by using a rural/farm setting.³⁶⁵ Wallace smirked, implying disinterestedness in being in a corn field, which disrupted Ettlinger's attempted recasting of him as an "everyman" author. His attire continued this break. It appeared fit for the rural setting; however, it portrayed an artistic separation. This separation between Wallace and his world mirrors the Romantic tradition his authorship emulates more so than the democratic values of professionalism. Ettlinger's portrait placed him both inside and outside; he was firmly inside high brow culture because of his previous works and visual images, but by posing him literally outside, it symbolized his outsider mentality even at this point in his career.

His death again served as the catalyst for the consecration of his visual image. It was with the renewed attention toward Wallace as a sacred genius that we were presented with what I would like to call the *definitive Wallace*.³⁶⁶ The *definitive Wallace* becomes the most prominent afterimage. The bandana adorned, longhaired, glasses wearing figure dominates the posthumous representations across media channels. Print articles, online articles and posts, and the author portraits for his posthumous works and reissues all use this image as an identifier of Wallace as sacred genius. The picture captured Wallace in a flattering light, respectfully memorializing him.

³⁶⁵ See figure 10: Marion Ettlinger, photographer, image from *Consider the Lobster* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2006). A modified version of this image was used as the author photo for the tenth anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006). The photograph on this publication zooms in to create a close-up of Wallace's face.

³⁶⁶ See figure 11: author photograph, Giovanni Giovannetti, photographer, from *The Pale King* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2011). This appears as the author photo on *Both Flesh and Not* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013) and the twentieth anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2016), as well as Wallace's website *David Foster Wallace Books*.

However, this afterimage's effects made Wallace into more of a character than an actual person, which he feared "becom[ing] this [type of] grotesque parody."³⁶⁷



Fig. 11: author photograph, Giovanni Giovannetti, photographer, from *The Pale King* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2011).

Wallace's image has been parodied visually many times since his death, often in animation. *The Simpsons* 2012 episode "A Totally Fun Thing Bart Will Never Do Again" parodied Wallace's essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." During a scene where Bart ate dinner on the cruise ship, a character sitting behind him resembled Wallace.³⁶⁸ The character mirrored Wallace's longhair, glasses, stubble, and smirking expression. The most striking aspect was the tuxedo-T-shirt. In the essay, Wallace described that "among my breaches of **Elegant Tea Time** etiquette apparently were: (a) imagining people would be amused by the tuxedo-design T-shirt I wore because I hadn't taken seriously the Celebrity brochure's

³⁶⁷ Lipsky, *Although of Course*, 191.

³⁶⁸ See figure 12: *The Simpsons*, "A Totally Fun Thing Bart Will Never Do Again," Simpsonsworld.com, 22:05, 2012, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.simpsonsworld.com/video/273522243657>.

instruction to bring a real tux on the Cruise.”³⁶⁹ The writers of the episode directly used Wallace’s image from the text, which both paid homage and poked fun at his authorial identity. In an interview at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2004, Wallace stated, “I think *The Simpsons* is important art. On the other hand, it’s also—in my opinion—relentlessly corrosive to the soul, and everything is parodied, and everything’s ridiculous.”³⁷⁰ Even though he believed *The Simpsons* was significant, he found their art to be more “commercially driven” than his art, which made the show problematic.³⁷¹ It is hard to know how Wallace would have reacted to *The Simpsons* parody, but the episode shows the iconic stature Wallace has attained in popular culture since his death.



Fig. 12: Animated Wallace, *The Simpsons*, “A Totally Fun Thing Bart Will Never Do Again,” Simpsonsworld.com, 22:05, 2012, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.simpsonsworld.com/video/273522243657>.

³⁶⁹ Wallace, *ASFT*, footnote 111, 331.

³⁷⁰ Steve Paulson, “To the Best of Our Knowledge: Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 134.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

Wallace's authorial identity becomes recognizable to audiences outside of the narrow confines of high brow culture through its strategic dissemination and manipulation in audio/visual media. His visual representations are deepened through his presences on radio, which allow him to engage in intellectual expressions of his authorship. However, his character succumbs to parody after his death. These parodies now extend beyond traditional audio/visual media into new media. The next section of this chapter deals with how Wallace performs across digital platforms and how they offer opportunities for Wallace as sacred genius to take on a new life. Many of these representations support the prevailing afterimage of a *definitive Wallace*, while some attempt to deconstruct the Romantic icon Wallace has become in the literary world.

Digital Sainthood

Wallace maintained a minimal digital presence during his life, but this does not mean he did not use the Internet to perform his authorial identity. From early interviews with e-zines to posthumous digital iconography, Wallace as sacred genius has gained a second life on the web. These sites offer new and often contradictory takes on the Romantic identity he performed. They do not entail his agency, but they continue what he began in other media. Wallace's digital image builds upon the *definitive Wallace*, making him a ghostly online presence.

During the promotional rounds for *Infinite Jest*, Wallace was interviewed by Valerie Stivers for *Stim*. It resembled the standard print interview in content and appearance. He discussed with Stivers how he "would like to know if the book moved people" and that this would be his "secret pretension" because it contradicted the desire for "his book to change the

world.”³⁷² He also detailed the role of literature in critiquing technology. He compared the intimacy literature created between author, characters, and readers as opposed to the distance other media created between creators, viewers, and users. Wallace critiqued new media while at the same time performing in it. This part of the interview functions ironically because of the its medium, similar to his “ironic” critique of television while on television. Although it takes similar form to a print interview, its publication on the web blurs the lines between media and their presentation of identity in the digital age.

Besides for the *Stim* interview and a few other appearances in web publications, Wallace’s digital presence was miniscule. He maintained no professional website, social media, or other forms of digital existence. This lack of participation stemmed from his authorial identity. He distanced himself from the web, much like he did with visual media, because it represented a lesser form of cultural production. His few engagements with new media revealed his performance strategy, however. He was savvy in choosing where to appear online, which allowed him to control his image, presenting it to a sympathetic audience more concerned with literary culture’s value than web culture’s values, like he did for all his media appearances.

Unlike the more controlled presentations of print and audio/visual media, the Internet is less easily restrained. This fact of the digital age allows for other cultural producers to assume the lead in constructing Wallace’s performance of the author as sacred genius. One of the first websites to focus solely on Wallace as an author was *The Howling Fantods*, which took its name from a term used repeatedly in *Infinite Jest*. This site operates currently, as well as maintains

³⁷² Valerie Stivers, “The Jester Holds Court: A Conversation with David Foster Wallace,” *Stim*, May 1996, accessed April 14, 2017, <http://www.stim.com/Stim-x/0596May/Verbal/dfwmain.html>. At certain points, hyperlinks provided the reader with context for Wallace’s answers and portions of *Infinite Jest*, like “O.N.A.N.” which was the acronym used in *Infinite Jest* to denote the combination of the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, and also a play on the word onanism, meaning masturbation.

Facebook and Twitter profiles. According to Duncan Driver, Nick Maniatis, an Australian English teacher, began the site in 1997 as a place to collect his interests in the early days of the public Internet. This site, what Driver calls an “internet curio,” however, emerged as a leading place for collecting links to anything about Wallace on the web.³⁷³ Maniatis’s website has become a respected place for Wallace ephemera on the web, but it is not the only site that seeks to maintain the aura around him.

Numerous Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram profiles exist under Wallace’s name. Many of these profiles are fan pages that celebrate him as a literary icon. The Instagram profile david_foster_wallace_says (@david_foster_wallace_says) describes itself as “[s]ome idioms, verbiage, philosophical insights, and poetical musings of the late literary genius David Foster Wallace.”³⁷⁴ The profile posts images of text from Wallace’s works and a few photographs, most notably Ettlinger’s portrait from *Oblivion*. A handful of other profiles also disseminate his work through social media, like David Foster Wallace (@InfiniteJest96) on Twitter, where *Infinite Jest* will be tweeted in its entirety, or David Foster Wallace (@DFWquotes) also on Twitter, where direct quotes from Wallace’s works are tweeted periodically.

Fans are not the only ones using the web to construct a version of Wallace. His peers have taken to new media to recontextualize and tear down his iconic stature. In a series of tweets beginning at 4:58 a.m. on September 6, 2012, Bret Easton Ellis fired back at Wallace’s consecration as a sacred genius. Ellis attacked “the Literary Douchebag Fools Pantheon” for Romanticizing Wallace as “a literary genius,” later claiming that this served as “the whole

³⁷³ Duncan Driver, “The Natural Noise of Good,” *The Howling Fantods*, July 10, 2011, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/dfw/interviews/the-natural-noise-of-good.html>.

³⁷⁴ david_foster_wallace_says (@david_foster_wallace_says), Instagram bio, n.d., https://www.instagram.com/david_foster_wallace_says/.

bullshit package” of “Saint David Foster Wallace” to a class of readers who wanted “to feel smart about themselves.”³⁷⁵ Ellis ended his tirade by admonishing Wallace as “needy” in his desire for literary celebrity and “conservative” in his aesthetics.³⁷⁶ He castigated literary culture and its worshiping of Wallace, attempting to tear down Wallace’s romanticized performances. Wallace, for Ellis, was not as rebellious as he put on, and he wanted to make clear that Wallace was complicit in his depiction as a sacred genius, which contradicted the belief that Wallace eschewed any sort of need for literary celebrity.

The fuel for Ellis’s “rant” was underlying jealousy or, as he joked, “a combo of insomnia and tequila,” but also the publication of D.T. Max’s *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*.³⁷⁷ Ellis claimed his tweet-storm was “not so much about David himself but more about how he had been reinterpreted by the culture.”³⁷⁸ He viewed Wallace’s authorial identity as “a kind of performance art,” and that the literary icon Wallace had become was a simple erasure of the complicated nature of people.³⁷⁹ According to Gabler, “celebrity is a kind of performance art,” and it is through the enactment of traits that celebrities fulfill audience desires and expectations.³⁸⁰ Ellis partially blamed Wallace for this creation, but it was the

³⁷⁵ Bret Easton Ellis (@BretEastonEllis), Twitter post, September 6, 2012, 4:54 and 4:58 a.m., <https://twitter.com/breteastonellis/status/243633191167082496?lang=en>.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 5:01 a.m., <https://twitter.com/breteastonellis/status/243635051504476161>.

³⁷⁷ Ellis, “The End of the Tour and Thoughts on David Foster Wallace.”

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Gabler, 8. See also P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2014), Joseph Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), and Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001) for modifications of the role performance has within critical studies of celebrities and celebrity

afterimage that Ellis sought to undermine. His use of social media and blogging allowed him to reach his intended audience directly without other intermediaries. Although he attempted, like Franzen in print, to insert the human element back into Wallace's image, particularly on the web, Ellis's tweets and blog post appeared as jealous and misguided attacks on a defenseless and sacred Wallace.

The persistence of Wallace's performance of the author as sacred genius extends to the website maintained by Hachette Book Group Inc., the parent company of Little, Brown. *David Foster Wallace Books* operates as the hub of Wallace's "verified" online presence. It provides the visitor with an "authentic" version of his digital identity and maintains the image of that Little, Brown helped construct. The rotating palimpsest of quotes on the home page immerses visitors in an overview of Wallace's works.³⁸¹ This feature combined with the parchment background of the webpages highlights the layered traditions present in his authorial identity. Adding to this are the links to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas-Austin and The David Foster Wallace Literary Trust.³⁸² These features legitimize Wallace in the literary world by showing how academia and nonprofits have accepted the maintenance of his role as a significant American author.

culture. For a specific literary celebrity analysis see Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

³⁸¹ See figure 13: Screenshot of *David Foster Wallace Books* published by Hachette Book Group Inc., accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.davidfosterwallacebooks.com/index.html>.

³⁸² One of the other two links that appear on the links page is to *The Howling Fantods*, which gives that fan site a level of authority in the construction and maintenance of Wallace's posthumous web presence.

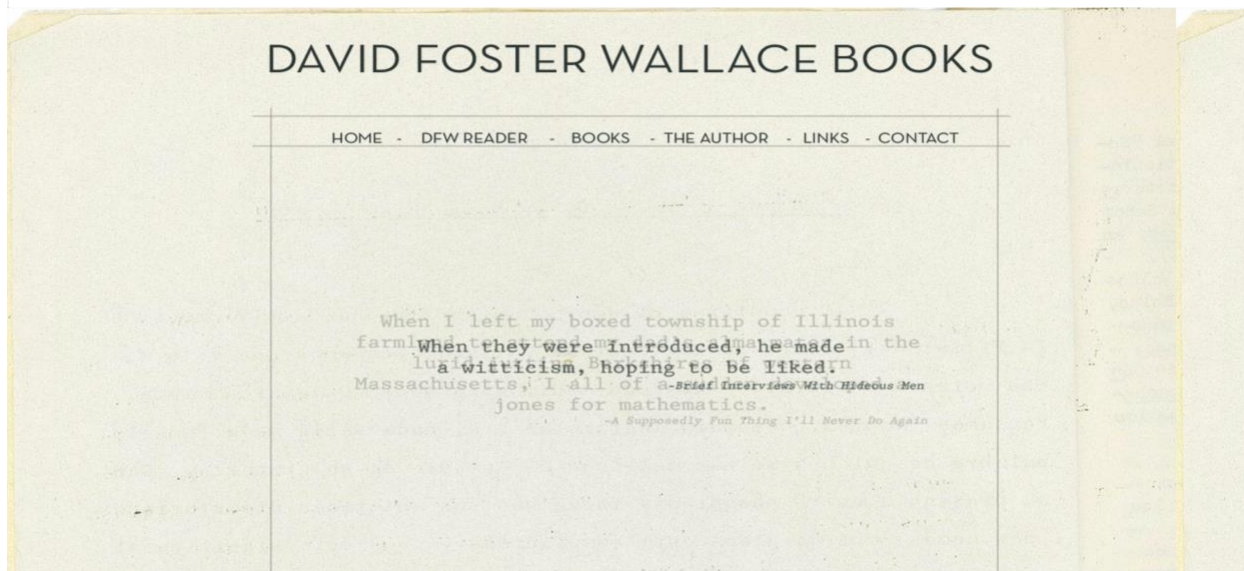


Fig. 13: Screenshot of *David Foster Wallace Books* published by Hachette Book Group Inc., accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.davidfosterwallacebooks.com/index.html>.

At the same time, the website merges the literary marketplace with Wallace's authorial performance. The *Internet Archive* first crawled *David Foster Wallace Books* on May 4, 2011.³⁸³ Its appearance coincided with the publication of *The Pale King*. Since then, the menu bar has been updated with a link to *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (Little, Brown and Company 2014), the most recent posthumous book. The commercial aspects of the site are transparent, problematizing Wallace's Romantic performance. The association of his digital identity with the marketing and consumption of literature mirrors the conflict he experienced while alive. Although the website presents an online version of him that is consistent with the identity he and others constructed, Hachette's primary business is to sell books, and they use Wallace's stature to direct visitors to where they can consume him and his products. The selling of Wallace, not

³⁸³ "Summary of davidfosterwallacebooks.com," *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, accessed April 17, 2017, https://web-beta.archive.org/web/20110501000000*/http://www.davidfosterwallacebooks.com/index.html.

only as a personality but also as a commodity, comes to full fruition in the design and function of his posthumous website.

Wallace's digital media performances consistently present him as a sacred genius by adding new layers to his print and audio/visual presences. At the same time, new media users/creators develop new features of him across multiple platforms. The representations solidify and maintain the prevailing image in many cases, but they continue to complicate his authorial identity by transparently linking it with the literary marketplace and celebrity culture. Wallace's digital presence is ghostly; his lack of active engagement removes his desire for control over his image, allowing its dominant traits to haunt his online representations. The manipulation of his authorial identity, as Ellis rightfully points out, clashes with what he seemingly stood for while alive, but it also represents an accurate depiction of his conscious performances.³⁸⁴

Canonized DFW

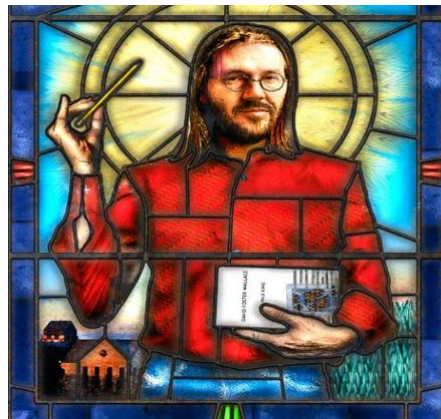


Fig. 14: DFW Icon, image by Max Ellis, from “Saint David Foster Wallace and *The Pale King*” by Benjamin Alsup, *Esquire*, March 15, 2011, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/reviews/a9606/the-pale-king-review-0411-5402611/>.

³⁸⁴ Ellis, ““The End of the Tour and Thoughts on David Foster Wallace.”

The above image is fitting to close this chapter on David Foster Wallace's performance of the author as sacred genius. The parody of religious imagery places Wallace firmly within the sacred. The elements of this digital creation reference, what Leo Braudy calls, "not an official code but a pictorial consensus, a diffused language of images" of Christian iconography.³⁸⁵ The development of symbols to identify figures as holding religious and cultural power allows images to serve a greater purpose in society. For Braudy, a connection exists "between image and person to reinforce their authority," which in turn justifies "the icon-lover's belief in the image's ability to transmit worship in one direction and spiritual power in the other."³⁸⁶ The persistent depiction of Wallace as sacred genius iconizes this representation within literary culture, allowing audiences to worship it fervently. The proliferation of these devotional images and texts, especially in digital media, preserves Wallace's afterimage, making his iconic stature ever more present.

Wallace's authorial identity performances entail the use of multiple media platforms and agents since his death in 2008. These provide Wallace and his co-authors with the tools to disseminate a consistent text. This consistent text becomes the doctrine for how Wallace should be depicted. The bandana clad, longhaired, spectacled figure leaves a lasting presence that uses the codes embedded within his works, interviews, audio/visual, and online appearances. His role as a contemporary version of Romantic genius canonizes his persona. Still, the Romantic image of Wallace as sacred genius elides the push-pull of his own relationship to the literary marketplace and celebrity.

³⁸⁵ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 207.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

The texts by his peers in print and digital media are taken as a form of iconoclasm against the *definitive Wallace* worshipers, and the image of him as an author who was savvy of his authorial performance becomes a contentious feature of many posthumous representations. However, Wallace subtly reveals in his interviews what his peers witnessed outside of public view: an author attempting to straddle the division between literary celebrity and true artist. He admitted to Terry Gross in 1997 that “self-consciousness up to a point is really useful and really helpful,” and that “there is a kind of hypervigilance” that he and other authors have over their representations.³⁸⁷ The couching of this revelation in the fact that self-consciousness is an essential component of authorship allows Wallace to reveal himself through diversion.

As a contemporary author, he was highly aware of and skeptical with the use of his authorial identity as a marketing tool, but he was also complicit in his commodification. Even though he used his performances to critique the system, Wallace knew his media presences had “high name recognition, which the publishers figure will translate into wider attention and better sales.”³⁸⁸ He battles with this knowledge until the end, and through his death, Wallace’s authorial identity truly becomes a promotional tool for the Romantic tradition of the author as sacred genius.

³⁸⁷ Terry Gross, “David Foster Wallace: The ‘Fresh Air’ Interview,” *NPR* August 14, 2015, accessed February 8, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2015/08/14/432161732/david-foster-wallace-the-fresh-air-interview>. See also Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, “Looking for Garde of Which to Be Avant: An Interview with David Foster Wallace,” in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). In this interview from 1993, Wallace stated almost verbatim his understanding of contemporary authorship and self-consciousness. Wallace extended this to discuss the attraction of celebrity on contemporary authors and their engagement with culture (13-14).

³⁸⁸ Wallace, *Both Flesh and Not*, 302.

Chapter 3

The Author as Digital Eccentric: Tao Lin

“idly editing my ‘internet presence’ in what seems like an arbitrary manner w/ a sensation of ‘faking’ a ‘professional facial expression’.”³⁸⁹

—Tao Lin, Twitter post, July 19, 2010, 11:13 a.m.

“At the time, I had no connection with the literary world. I didn’t know anyone. So I felt that I could make an ass out of myself because I didn’t think it could possibly affect my life.”

—Tao Lin, from Kaitlin Phillips, “The Education of Tao Lin,” *The Eye: The Magazine of the Columbia Spectator* 11, no. 2 (September 22, 2011): 10.

“[B]ut at the heart of it, Lin’s public-facing image is thoroughly marked by prankish stunts and apparently...put-on awkwardness that it can only be interpreted as a way to provoke a response, usually something along the lines of, ‘Is this motherfucker for real?’”

—Cole Stryker, “Go to Bed Tao Lin,” *Rhizome*, March 27, 2012.

As younger writers emerge in the literary world, digital media become central components for performing their authorial identities. These writers use social media, blogs, and other online platforms to communicate with their readers and to establish themselves. They realize maintaining an online presence is as necessary as publishing in print nowadays. Although figures like Jonathan Franzen dabble reluctantly online, many older writers view digital media as a lesser form of culture. This is not the case for many who begin their careers during the twenty-first-century. These authors are digitally born because they often do not travel the traditional path of print publication first. In a sense their authorship is a convergence of performances from all

³⁸⁹ An edited version of this tweet appears in Lin’s portion of *Selected Tweets* (Short Flight/Long Drive Books, 2015). In the print version, Lin’s tweet reads, “editing my internet presence in what feels like an arbitrary manner with a sensation of faking a professional facial expression” (11). The revision of the tweet between online posting and print publication gives the impression that Lin constantly reworks the presentation of his persona across multiple media and carefully considers language and its textual appearance.

media, but especially new media. These authors believe contemporary literature is not solely print based. To digitally born authors, engaging with the literary world across all media is necessary to become recognized. This phenomenon occasions new conceptions of authors and authorship in the digital age.

Tao Lin serves as a striking example of the digitally born author. He has published three novels, a novella, a short story collection, two poetry collections, three eBooks, a collection of tweets, and numerous articles since appearing on the literary scene in 2006. Besides this prolific output, Lin first garnered attention through his online presences, particularly his blog. *Reader of Depressing Books* allowed him to cultivate an audience and construct an authorial identity even before publishing his first poetry collection, *you are a little bit happier than i am* (Action Books, 2006).

At the same time, he developed a reputation as a controversial figure. The issue did not stem from his art so much as from his self-promotion, both online and in-person. His shenanigans, such as plastering the *Gawker* offices with Britney Spears bumper stickers and spamming publications' emails, trolled the literary establishment.³⁹⁰ His art took a backseat to his attention-seeking persona, but he believed this combined with his heavy use of digital media made him different. Lin saw the Internet as a place to publish his works, to perform his authorial identity, and to generate attention. This provided him with another means of presentation along with the traditional methods. Even though he used the Internet to create buzz, Lin realized that for a writer cultural capital was still bestowed primarily through print. This led him to publish his

³⁹⁰ See Jen Carlson, "Tao Lin Wages Sticker Attack on Gawker's Door," *Gothamist*, June 4 2008; Steven Hall, "Author Attacks Gawker with Britney Spears Stickers for Book Promotion," *AdRants*, June 13, 2008; Richard Lawson, "Should We Give Tao Lin's Intern a Job?," *Gawker*, August 23, 2008; Zach Baron, "The Problem with Tao Lin," *The Village Voice*, September 8, 2010.

major works through this traditional medium. Post print publishing, he maintained a strong online presence but also limited his antics, preferring to use the Internet for more professional forms of authorial performance.

Although he has not gained the prestige of a Jonathan Franzen or David Foster Wallace, Lin desires their levels of recognition. His move from the independent publisher Melville House, which published his works from 2007 to 2010, to the Penguin/Random House subsidiary Vintage Contemporaries for his novel *Taipei* (2013) was a conscious choice.³⁹¹ This shows he aspired to be represented as a serious mainstream writer, a status which could be obtained more easily with the aid of a large-scale publisher. With the money and resources available at Vintage Contemporaries, Lin can enact his authorship across a wide variety of publications. His association with a prominent publishing house lends him economic capital, as well, because publishing with them made him “financially secure.”³⁹² This financial security allowed Lin to

³⁹¹ See Nate Freeman, “Tao Lin Gchats About New Agent Bill Clegg and His Siddhartha-Inspired Next Novel,” *Observer*, August 4, 2011. In this interview, Lin discussed how he sought out the literary agent Bill Clegg. Also, Lin responded to a question about “selling-out” because Clegg was well known in mainstream publishing. See also Mike Vilensky, “Tao Lin’s Next Chapter,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2011. Vilensky described the selling of *Taipei* to Vintage at auction. In the short article, Lin was quoted as stating that “Vintage/Knopf publishes most of my favorite writers: Lorrie Moore, Ann Beattie, Bret Easton Ellis.” This highlights how Lin aspires to achieve literary recognition comparable to these writers.

³⁹² Stephan Lee, “Tao Lin Talks His Upcoming Novel ‘Taipei’. Also, See the Cover. It’s Shiny and It Moves—EXCLUSIVE,” *Entertainment Weekly*, February 1, 2013, accessed June 8, 2017, <http://ew.com/article/2013/02/01/tao-lin-talks-his-upcoming-novel-taipei-also-see-the-cover-its-shiny-and-it-moves-exclusive/>.

See also, David Shapiro, “Tao Lin,” *Interview*, June 6, 2013, http://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/tao-lin-1/#_. On his \$50,000 advance from Vintage for *Taipei*, Lin stated, “But did I expect \$50,000? Yeah, because it doesn’t seem like more than I should get. It just seems average, like what I should get.” Lin is hard to read here because his words can be taken in multiple ways. In one way, Lin comes off as pretentious because he “expect[ed]” to receive that sum for his unpublished work; however, Lin belittles his work by using the word “average”. Fitting with how Lin discusses himself and his work, I believe that the latter reading of this statement is closer to what Lin means regarding his advance.

concentrate on his art as a full-time career. Through his unyielding dedication to literature, he mirrors how figures such as Franzen and Wallace perform variations of Romantic and professional authorship. Lin's progression has allowed him to move away from the eccentricities of his early career.

However, his use of Internet media complicates his association with traditions of authorship. Lin values Twitter and other social media platforms. According to Emily Witt of *The Daily Beast*, he is "one of the few fiction writers around who engages with contemporary life, rather than treating his writing online as existing in opposition to or apart from the hallowed analog space of the novel."³⁹³ He collapses the boundary between writer, author, and audience with these presences. This feature of his authorship has gained significant attention in literary culture. Michael Silverblatt of *Bookworm* described how "[Lin's] everywhere on the web" and that "[y]ou can't tweet without knowing him" before one of Lin's three appearances on the program.³⁹⁴ Lin's ubiquitous Internet presences clash with the Romantic traits often attached to serious authors. The self-promoting aspects of social media affect his representation in the literary world; instead of begrudgingly participating in promotional events, Lin's constant presence on social media and message boards makes him appear like a fame seeker as opposed to a professional author. It is this conflict between tradition and progress that underpins his performances of the author as digital eccentric.

In this chapter, I trace the development of Lin's authorial identity through multiple media, beginning with his cultivation of a strong web presence early in his career. His use of the

³⁹³ Emily Witt, "The Gpistolary Novel: Tao Lin's *Taipei*," *The Daily Beast*, June 18, 2013, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/06/18/the-gpistolary-novel-tao-lin-s-taipei>.

³⁹⁴ Michael Silverblatt, "Tao Lin: *Taipei*," *Bookworm*, KCRW, August 1, 2013, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/bookworm/tao-lin-taipei>.

Internet, traditional visual and auditory media, and print allows him to act out his authorship in accordance with his values. However, the effects of traditions of authorship are not absent from his performances. As his career progressed, he became more subdued and print became a primary medium, as opposed to an auxiliary of his digital output. Tao Lin exhibits how authorship in the twenty-first-century includes the intense use of digital media in addition to print and audio/visual media. He also becomes an exemplar of the pressure on authors to ground their authorial identities within traditional forms of authorship to gain mainstream recognition.

The Tao of the Internet

Early on Lin used his blog, *Reader of Depressing Books*, to critique the literary establishment and make a name in the literary world. In a post from May 29, 2005, he discussed how he interpreted Lorrie Moore's work as "a 'depressing book.'"³⁹⁵ He clarified that Moore's works explored why people were depressed. The most striking thing about his blog posts from this time is that he works through a definition of art and literature in a short space. At one point, he criticized the disregard of "'tea-towel' fiction," which Moore was a prime example, as not as significant as fiction centered on race or other large socio-cultural issues. Lin wrote, "talking about 'art' here" to contextualize the varied ways any art, but especially literature, explored the human condition. For the remainder of this post and the two other posts from late-May 2005, he justified his reading of Moore's works and the works of Jean Rhys and Richard Yates as

³⁹⁵ Tao Lin, *Reader of Depressing Books: Tao Lin's blog 2006-2013*, Blogger, last modified October 5, 2010, from *Internet Archive*, http://classic-web.archive.org/web/20060505013203/http://reader-of-depressing-books.blogspot.com/2005_05_01_reader-of-depressing-books_archive.html.

significant and valuable. He used this space to place himself within the conversation around literary value, which he contended was often misapplied.

Posts such as these were used to generate attention. The ability to communicate directly with his audience via web technology provides an avenue to circumvent traditional channels of publication. These early blog posts display his savviness in using the web to promote himself and his views on literary culture. The right-side menu of *Reader of Depressing Books* linked to online literary journals where he had been published. These links were free advertisements for his art. Also, he linked to posts he had written about wanting to be “commission[ed]” to write a piece about why he “can’t concentrate.” The post read, “if michael chabon couldn’t concentrate someone would commission him to write an article called ‘i can’t concentrate.’”³⁹⁶ Again, Lin critiqued mainstream culture in one short sentence. By comparing himself to Chabon, he placed his authorial identity alongside a leading contemporary author and hinted that he was capable of producing similar work. At the same time, he positioned himself as an outsider who found absurdity in the continued valorizing of a select few.

Lin strengthened his claim for consideration as a serious author in a comment to Carla Costa of the literary blog *Kitchen Sink*. He wrote, “i’m serious / i’m a serious person, with a list of items i must accomplish.” Costa replied that the commissioned piece would be only hers and not appear in the magazine because she wanted “to own a small piece of...[Lin’s] soul.” Costa romanticized Lin here, showing the value his writing held in underground circles.³⁹⁷ This post

³⁹⁶ Ibid., April 12, 2006, <http://classic-web.archive.org/web/20060505014002/http://reader-of-depressing-books.blogspot.com/2006/04/i-cant-concentrate.html>.

³⁹⁷ Lin and Costa’s friendship is unclear from this interaction, but it can be assumed that they are knowledgeable of one another. If they know each other’s views on art and literature, then Costa’s comment could be interpreted as sarcasm, poking fun at the Romantic notion that works of art contain the soul of the artist.

and the subsequent comments revealed Lin performing an authorial identity that wanted to be taken seriously but also an identity that found the literary world faulty.

His presentation of himself as a professional writer became a consistent theme on *Reader of Depressing Books*. In a post from July 13, 2006, he discussed his beliefs about how personality became an art form for individuals and writers. He wrote, “a person’s personality is their ‘art,’” and he equated “the choice of what words to use in a poem, what font to use in a book, what to focus on in a chapter” to other essential decisions.³⁹⁸ He alluded to the performative nature of writing and how certain actions affected the author’s representations. For Lin, authorship and art were firmly entwined with personality. Both textual and visual appearance affected the interpretation of the author, similar to Wallace’s concerns in “The Nature of Fun.”

His authorial identity at this stage and afterward became performance art, something to generate attention but also to deconstruct the boundary between the actual person and the art. The conscious choice to write in lowercase and strip punctuation from his blog posts aids the performance. He comes across as net-savvy, knowledgeable of the ways in which informal communication is presented on the web. On the other hand, his use of these informal writing techniques signifies he is not serious or professional, something he satirizes with a navigation link entitled “i used capital letters.”³⁹⁹ The inclusion of this satirical link showcased Lin’s humor

³⁹⁸ Ibid., July 13, 2006, <http://reader-of-depressing-books.blogspot.com/>.

³⁹⁹ Lin, *Reader of Depressing Books*. The link appeared on the April 29, 2006 post. It linked to *The Konundrum Engine Literary Review*’s publication of Lin’s poem “The Poem I Wrote In My Room After We Fought On The Internet And You Called Me A Dick And Said You Had To Go To Sleep And Said You Would Email Me Over Thanksgiving From Home But Then Said ‘Forget It’ After I Said About You Emailing Me Over Thanksgiving From Home That ‘I Doubt It’.” In this poem, Lin used capital letter for some words but not for others. He capitalized the first word in sentence fragments and some complete sentences.

toward the expectations of professionalism. The ways he chooses to present his blog indicates his awareness to the details that affect the representation of an author's identity.

Although he viewed personality as art, Lin's online performances were misconstrued as attention seeking and juvenile. He proposed that "sometimes personality is used for financial gain" by performing a particular cultural role, and he used Jay Leno adapting his stand-up comic persona to appeal to the mainstream *Tonight Show* audience as an example.⁴⁰⁰ The claim that personality can result in fame and fortune is one of the hallmarks of celebrity culture. According to Boorstin, "To publicize is to expose" the celebrity's personality to a mass audience.⁴⁰¹ Media attention is what feeds celebrity personalities, and it is through media coverage that celebrities gain significant recognition. Lin's online performances caused him to become associated with this negative side of celebrity, which stripped him of any traits of serious authorship.

After the publication of his novel *Eeeee, Eee, Eeee* and short story collection *Bed* in 2007, Lin sought coverage from the website *Gawker*. Emily Gould, a *Gawker* editor at the time and a writer, stated that all editors had attempted to prevent Lin from appearing on their site because of "his spammy, retarded, deceptive, always on the verge of interesting but never actually interesting Internet stunts."⁴⁰² Gould's snarky remarks presented the dual nature of Lin's authorial identity. One side was extremely off-putting and unprofessional, while the other side was creative and unlike more traditional authors. She recounted how Lin sent numerous emails to *Gawker*, and she compared his emails to "being poked on Facebook every hour by someone you don't know or like." Lin disrupted the professionalism behind authorship. This caused him

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., July 13, 2006, <http://reader-of-depressing-books.blogspot.com/>.

⁴⁰¹ Boorstin, 89.

⁴⁰² Emily Gould, "Now We Also Hate Miranda July," *Gawker*, June 27, 2007, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://gawker.com/272734/now-we-also-hate-miranda-july>.

to appear as a pesky annoyance, but it also showed the effort he put into his performance. In spite of her decree that Lin would not appear on *Gawker*, Gould created “an all Tao Lin edition of Glaring Omissions.” This ironic move gave him the coverage he desired.

Although she was highly critical of his promotional tactics, her article provided Lin an entry point to another audience. The final paragraph depicted him as a childish attention-whore who did not deserve meaningful recognition:

Tao Lin, I know you’re reading this. I just want you to know that because of your ill-conceived self-marketing strategy, you have 100% guaranteed that I will never read your damned book with its oh-so-wacky title. Dennis Cooper might love you, but that doesn’t mean a thing to us. (Hey, maybe he’ll chop you up!) Your publicity games aren’t a play on fame-seeking or celebrity culture. Actually, you’re maybe perhaps the single most irritating person we’ve had to deal with—and you wouldn’t believe our in-box. Stop it. Stop it now. And now we will go back to never mentioning you again.

This biting remark labeled him in the literary world. His authorial identity became so enmeshed with his tactics for self-promotion that other mediators referred to Gould’s comments when describing him.

Nevertheless, Lin showed he was deeply concerned with the historical tension between authorship and the literary marketplace, regardless of the negative press. In an interview with the website *Bookslut*, Lin described his guiding principles: “My life is controlled by ethics and morals. Ethics and morals have me on lockdown. I’m being serious now. Without morals life is meaningless in the long-term. Most people do not have morals. I try to have morals. I think my goal in life is to reduce pain and suffering. I’m being serious right now.”⁴⁰³ The repetition of “I’m being serious” directed the interviewer, Ned Vizzini, and the reader toward a different facet of Lin’s authorial identity. By restating this, Lin attempted to break down the image of him as a mere trickster. However, his proposed seriousness faltered when asked to comment on his

⁴⁰³ Ned Vizzini, “An Interview with Tao Lin,” *Bookslut*, May 2007, accessed May 5, 2017, http://www.bookslut.com/features/2007_05_011092.php.

“ethical stance toward the distribution/publication of writers on the web.” In his answer, he discussed the ways “a lot of editors care a lot about getting the ‘best’ writers ‘first,’” and he contended that for-profit magazines like *The New Yorker* were not as good as “nonprofit” magazines, again echoing David Foster Wallace. Lin did not directly address the question; instead, he directed the audience “to Gawker” for more information “like a little bitch.” This act stripped away his mature seriousness and replaced it with a childish punk attitude.

This punk attitude continued in his discussion of the concept “sell-out,” where he stated that being offered a large advance for a novel was not selling-out but a way to disrupt the system and “promote a better world.” He followed this statement with how “productive” his actions would be because he would “talk shit about Knopf, which is part of a giant corporation” afterward.⁴⁰⁴ His views on how the literary market offered opportunities while at the same time being harmful displayed the effects the man of letters tradition had on his authorial performance. The comments about for-profit literary magazines and mainstream publishers displayed the tension many writers face. Lin’s belief in disrupting the system from within was noble, but altogether futile. It may have provided ways to “stick it to the man,” but as Lin points out, art suffers, becoming less impactful to change.

Acting as both an online punk and a serious author allowed Lin to use the Internet to disrupt traditional publication channels and authorship, however. On his blog, he proposed selling shares of his unwritten novel to the highest bidders.⁴⁰⁵ He urged the prospective investors to think of him “in some way as a corporation instead of as a person” and any promotion of his works would lead to their profits increasing: “I feel it is inevitable that I will receive mainstream

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Lin, *Reader of Depressing Books*, July 31, 2008.

attention at some point, if only because of my effect on ‘the economy,’ which mainstream journalists can see (and cannot ignore, due to the nature of publicly-owned companies) when they look at Bookscan, at which point sales of all my books will go up again.”⁴⁰⁶ He cast himself as a future investment. The money he sought would give him time to “focus more on the novel” rather than splitting time between writing and working another job.⁴⁰⁷ Lin’s act was a direct critique of the literary marketplace and the way writing is valued by American society. In this, he merges the Romantic desire to be free from control with the professional desire to earn a living through art.

Lin’s investment plan paid off, both through monetary gain and media coverage. Shares in the unwritten novel, eventually published by Melville House as *Richard Yates* in 2010, produced \$12,000.⁴⁰⁸ He correctly predicted the attention from mainstream publications. On his blog, he linked to the coverage in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, London’s *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, and *Gawker*.⁴⁰⁹ Like his earlier coverage in *Gawker*, the writer, Moe Tkacik, degraded Lin and the literary world at the same time: “A controlling stake in a hypothetical major work by a minor possessor of literary microfame is worth \$12,000.”⁴¹⁰ The biting tone of this final sentence labeled Lin, again, as an author not worthy of significant literary attention; however, Tkacik misinterpreted the sale. Lin used the blog post to further his authorial

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Moe Tkacik, “How Tao Lin Made a Quick Twelve Grand Selling a Novel He Hasn’t Written!,” *Gawker*, August 22, 2008, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://gawker.com/5040697/how--tao-lin-made-a-quick-twelve-grand-selling-a-novel-he-hasnt-written>.

⁴⁰⁹ Lin, *Reader of Depressing Books*, July 31, 2008.

⁴¹⁰ Tkacik.

identity as a digital rebel who pushed against the establishment. By selling shares in his unwritten novel, Lin inverted the contemporary patronage system away from publishing companies by turning back to individuals directly supporting the creation of art.

Extending from his views on commercialism's effects on literary culture, Lin counteracted the claims that he was not a serious author. His appearances in more intellectual online publications supported his attempts to distance his authorial identity from *Gawker*, while at the same time seducing these celebrity focused publications to cover him. By granting interviews with cultural and literary websites such as *Bookslut* and *The Rumpus*, he participated in a more highbrow form of digital culture.⁴¹¹ These sites allowed Lin to perform the role of the author as an artist.

Nevertheless, the principle idea around Lin was his creativity in the presentation and performance of his authorial identity rather than writing. Fellow writer and a former roommate, Nick Antosca questioned whether Lin's identity was genuine or constructed by setting up an "ambiguity—shy, savant or malicious publicity-hog."⁴¹² Antosca brought to light the dual images of Lin that circulated online, and these images involved the amount of information available on him. According to Lin in an interview on *HTMLGiant*, privacy harmed artistic expression and created misinterpretations about a person's identity:

Seems like I've had some kind of ideal, in the past five or six years, that I would like all information that is true, and that is related to me, be made available. If I feel that people are going to dislike me for releasing information that is either true or 'fictional but artistically satisfying' I also feel that I don't want to allow myself the choice of censoring myself. If I did something that a number of people will dislike me for doing I would want

⁴¹¹ See "Hello," on *The Rumpus* homepage, <http://therumpus.net/>. *The Rumpus* describes itself as a website for "something more challenging" and "a place where people come to be themselves through their writing, to tell their stories or speak their minds in the most artful and authentic way they know how."

⁴¹² Nick Antosca, "The Hipster Thief," *The Daily Beast*, September 19, 2009, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/09/19/the-hipster-thief>.

any mystery, like a horse or pigeon.”⁴¹⁶ This shed light on the issue at the heart of Lin’s authorial performance: being an author with prestige and privacy versus being a shallow celebrity.

However, the most revealing line in this post referenced his attention to authorship as a performance and a product. He referred to a possible novel’s title as something “that could strongly brand a writer.”⁴¹⁷ The brand he cultivated online represented a shift in how authors interacted with media other than print. He used the Internet to gain some control over his image, while at the same time allowing others to craft him through their interpretations. Lin inverted literary tradition. By responding directly to comments on his blog and other websites, he participated with his readers in their reading of his authorial identity and art, fracturing the Romantic conception of authorship as a solitary practice.

As attention grew around him with the publication of *Richard Yates* in 2010, many focused on Lin as an innovator of digital promotion more than writing techniques. Daniel B. Roberts, in *Salon*, stated, “What fame Lin has already achieved is a testament to his ability to master viral and unconventional publicity techniques.”⁴¹⁸ In categorizing Lin’s writing, Roberts captured the essence behind his online presence: “...Lin’s writing, despite its shortcomings, has perfectly captured the aimless malaise of the Internet generation. It’s no wonder, then, that he has successfully used the Web to manage his career and push his name onto computer screens everywhere.”⁴¹⁹ Although he allots Lin some respect for his literary talent, Roberts believed Lin revealed how the Internet had become a tool for self-promotion and expression in literary

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., May 2, 2009.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., May 2, 2009.

⁴¹⁸ Daniel B. Roberts, “Tao Lin: Lit ‘it boy’ for the Internet Age,” *Salon*, August 24, 2010, accessed May 5, 2017, http://www.salon.com/2010/08/24/tao_lin/.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

culture, and this aspect “ha[d] made him a Web phenomenon” as opposed to a literary phenomenon.⁴²⁰ According to Lin, Internet fame was not something he intentionally wanted, but it provided him with “a constant source of interesting shit to look at whenever...[he] want[ed] to look at it.”⁴²¹ He claimed, “if I’m ever bored, all I have to do is go to a computer and Google myself and see endless entertaining shit, that I am able to influence by just typing something into Twitter.”⁴²² He is conscious of his ability to interact with his audience and his critics by participating in online discussions. The knowledge that much of this discussion exists without his permission provides him a semblance of joy, which he seems to find comforting because at least he is receiving attention.

This attention was, nonetheless, primarily negative, with much of it serving to cast him as an outlier in the literary world. Cole Stryker claimed, in *Rhizome*, “Bloggers, eager to demonstrate that they are in on the joke, describe Lin as the first author to really figure out how to harness the viral potential of the web, while his detractors see him as just another boring publicity hound whose actual work doesn’t stand up to scrutiny from those who are able to look past his trollish antics.”⁴²³ Stryker’s piece took its title, “Go to Bed Tao Lin,” from a meme circulating on *4chan*. Members of the site created it because, as Stryker stated, “they claim he [Tao Lin] uses the board to plug his work, which flies in the face of the site’s culture of pure

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Chandler Levack, “~2.5-Hour/IRL Interview with Tao Lin on MDMA: The 11,810-Word Transcript,” *Thought Catalog*, November 2, 2010, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://thoughtcatalog.com/chandler-levack/2010/11/an-interview-with-tao-lin-on-mdma-the-unedited-transcript/>.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Cole Stryker, “Go to Bed Tao Lin.” *Rhizome*, March 27, 2012. Accessed May 10, 2017. <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2012/mar/27/tao-lin/>.

anonymity,” and he added that the members “also hate...[Lin] because he’s an NYC hipster artfag.” This policing of online discussions participates in the ways authorship has often been viewed in America. Many participants view Lin’s self-promotion as “trollgaze.” According to Stryker, *The Village Voice*’s music critic Maura Johnston defined “trollgaze” as “being outrageously obnoxious and/or odd in order to develop an inscrutable public persona, which ostensibly will lead to increased exposure courtesy of head-scratching and/or facepalming journalists and subsequently, fame and/or fortune.”⁴²⁴ Lin’s digital antics fit within this definition. Perhaps, the most fitting part of Stryker’s use of the term and its application to Lin was that trollgaze intentionally blurred “your public-facing image, your actual self, and (last and probably least) your art—and where the three meet and diverge.”⁴²⁵ This aptly applied to Lin’s use of online media because his presences seem constructed to gain any type of attention rather than promote serious art.

Lin’s conscious performance of authorship problematized many of his attempts to cast himself as a serious figure in the literary world. He stated, “Yeah, writers are always talking about wanting to be original. But it seems like they’re stuck into certain things outside of their writing.”⁴²⁶ The concept of originality is slippery, but Lin’s interpretation is steeped in the Romantic valuing of originality. Lin, like the Romantics, reacts against certain aspects of society and culture. His online authorial performances subvert the traditional images of authorship by consciously manipulating his media presences. Zach Sokol called Lin “one of the most bizarre—

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Levack.

and maybe even *sui generis*—authors working at the moment.”⁴²⁷ This remark presented both sides of Lin’s authorial identity again—the weird/strange and the original genius. As he performed his authorial identity, he pushed against established traditions of authorship, making believers in those definitions uncomfortable. Stryker extended the notion of Lin being disruptive: his “persona is ultimately a reaction against the hyper-self-aware blogosphere and its ironic distance,” and that “[t]o be publicly awkward is to reject social norms is to ‘not give a shit’ is to be vulnerable is to be authentic: that ever-elusive ideal of the age.”⁴²⁸ Stryker was correct in describing Lin in this way because his authorial identity incorporated the punk, but also Romantic, attitude of rejecting authority in favor of more underground, restricted cultural recognition.

At the same time, Lin courted the literary establishment.⁴²⁹ When describing his work and commenting on the internet “buzz” around his authorial identity, Lin told Stryker, “My books, they’re like, conventional literary novels and short stories, so without all the internet stuff,

⁴²⁷ Zach Sokol, “5,000+ Word Unedited Interview with Tao Lin,” *Thought Catalog*, July 31, 2012, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://thoughtcatalog.com/zach-sokol/2012/07/5000-word-unedited-interview-with-tao-lin/>.

⁴²⁸ Stryker.

⁴²⁹ Stephen Tully Dierks, “Long Ass Interview with Tao Lin part 2 of 2.” *HTMLGiant*, October 13, 2010, accessed May 11, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/feature/long-ass-interview-with-tao-lin-part-2-of-2/>. Lin tells Dierks that he wants his novel *Richard Yates* to be reviewed in *The New York Times Magazine*.

See also Stryker’s “Go to Bed Tao Lin.” *Rhizome*, March 27, 2012. In this interview, Lin stated he was not concerned with bad reviews from “*The New York Times* and other stuff like that.” It can be assumed that Lin is performing when stating this because if he aspires to be a serious literary author then *The New York Times* plays a very large role in establishing his cultural capital in literary culture.

See also Zach Sokol, “5,000+ Word Unedited Interview with Tao Lin,” *Thought Catalog*, July 31, 2012. Lin attempted to not care about his audience expanding with his move to Vintage, but his ambivalence cracked when Sokol asked if he wanted to see one of his books on the *New York Times* bestseller list: “Yeah, but only because it’d give me ore financial security. Not because I know some person is reading my work.”

a lot of people just view me as a normal literary writer, and that might've helped me in some way."⁴³⁰ By being "a normal literary writer," Lin becomes just another author in the supersaturated field of literary production, and his Romantic desire for originality and authenticity are wiped away.⁴³¹

By performing authorship against tradition, Lin focused media attention on his authorship and let audiences move from that toward his art. For him, the persona created attention for the work and then the persona receded from its dominant position to let the art speak for itself. His online presences allow him to distance himself from traditional literary culture. Few big name serious authors engage with digital media like Lin. It was well known David Foster Wallace did not participate in online culture and only surfed the web a few times before his death and that Jonathan Franzen viewed social media and other online media as lower forms of cultural expression.⁴³² Lin, on the other hand, finds the Internet to be an essential medium for contemporary authorship. Without it, he possibly would not have been able to distinguish

⁴³⁰ Stryker.

⁴³¹ Lin made it clear in many interviews the influence Lorrie Moore, Ann Beattie, Joy Williams, Jean Rhys, and Richard Yates had on his work. However, other media personalities viewed Lin's work more akin to other writers. The subhead of Nick Antosca's "The Hipster Thief" called Lin "a gonzo lit icon." This categorization links Lin's authorial identity to Hunter S. Thompson. The case could be made that there is a firm connection between the two authors—both feature drugs and other substances heavily in their works, both have eccentric authorial personae and both use autobiographical elements in their works. In the introduction to the interview, Antosca equated Lin's work to Japanese author Haruki Murakami, but he did not describe how he made the connection.

⁴³² See David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 87. See also Jonathan Franzen, "What's Wrong with the Modern World," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2013, accessed January 03, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130913183746/http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/13/jonathan-franzen-wrong-modern-world>.

himself from other aspiring writers. His blog and awkward interview appearances established his authorial identity parallel to his literary work.

Around 2012, a shift occurred in Lin's online performance of authorship. His appearances became more professional, avoiding the overtly awkward acts of his early career. One reason for this could be linked to his new publisher, Vintage Contemporaries. The move from independent to mainstream publisher allowed him to gain a larger audience and receive more money; however, this also involved reassessing how he performed. Lin continued to be an eccentric in certain online publications, but his authorial performance mellowed to show a mainstream audience he was a serious author. In the Sokol interview, Lin admitted, "In the past, I would force myself to do anything, thinking of my future."⁴³³ He believed that in order to make a living as a writer and become an author, he must perform. The move to Vintage Contemporaries gave him the feeling that he no longer had to resort to these tricks to gain a foothold in the literary world: "After this book, I think I'll have enough money to be able to turn down a lot of stuff." The money Vintage could offer made it easier for Lin to slip into the traditional role of a professional, and he believed that "since it's [*Taipei*] on Vintage" that he would be able to live comfortably.⁴³⁴ This showed Lin had bought into professional authorship and the literary marketplace's ability to provide for the writer.

The author as digital eccentric did not fully disappear with his move toward a more mainstream audience. In a profile on the culture website *Vulture*, Lin was depicted as an

⁴³³ Sokol.

⁴³⁴ Ibid. See also Stephan Lee, "Tao Lin Talks His Upcoming Novel 'Taipei'. Also, See the Cover. It's Shiny and It Moves—EXCLUSIVE," *Entertainment Weekly*, February 1, 2013, accessed June 8, 2017, <http://ew.com/article/2013/02/01/tao-lin-talks-his-upcoming-novel-taipei-also-see-the-cover-its-shiny-and-it-moves-exclusive/>.

eccentric through his apartment's décor, "his DIY haircut," and his drug use.⁴³⁵ He admitted, "The longer I was awake the more intimate I felt with the novel [*Taipei*]. Sleep reset that intimacy... I don't even really have a reason to stay up anymore, but I don't not have a reason either. I'm just, like, organizing my Gmail account for six hours." He was describing his use of the ADHD medication Adderall while writing *Taipei*. The image that emerged over the course of this profile was of a social and cultural rebel who experimented with drugs for artistic purposes. The photograph at the beginning of the profile showed his drug case, which contained pills, aluminum foil, and other paraphernalia. This gave the impression that he was an addict, but White clarified that Lin was not an addict to drugs but an addict to art and self-presentation. Two years earlier, Levack described his interview with Lin as "a pivotal juncture in the enigmatic internet presence of Tao Lin, and surely one of the few where a writer has openly agreed to be interviewed on a drug commonly associated with house music."⁴³⁶ Lin's drug use while conducting interviews is not an original performance by an author, but it placed him within the tradition of artists who embraced drugs and other substances.

In 2011, Lin published the essay "How to Give a Reading on Mushrooms" on *Thought Catalog*. The appearance of this piece, in-between Levack's interview and White's profile, reinforced the image of Lin as an eccentric. In the essay, he contended that "it's irrelevant if everyone in the room views you as insane."⁴³⁷ This line shed light on his strange behavior during

⁴³⁵ Rachel R. White, "Staying Up All Night With an Adderall'd Tao Lin," *Vulture*, June 5, 2013, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/06/tao-lin-profile-taipei-drugs-adderall.html>.

⁴³⁶ Levack.

⁴³⁷ Tao Lin, "How to Give a Reading on Mushrooms," *Thought Catalog*, April 7, 2011, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://thoughtcatalog.com/tao-lin/2011/04/how-to-give-a-reading-on-mushrooms/>.

public performances. It seems as though he did not care about how audiences perceived his mannerisms, speech, and other actions when appearing publicly. He referenced Hunter S. Thompson twice during the piece, which linked it to the claims made by Antosca in *The Daily Beast*. Lin declared, “Think ‘Hunter S. Thompson’ and distractedly sense the aesthetic of the movie *Aliens*,” while later he repeated, “Think ‘Hunter S. Thompson.’” By playing off the image of Thompson, Lin created a similar version of Thompson’s authorship. He became the author as drug-fueled eccentric.

However, Lin’s eccentricity required grounding in a consistent performance of his authorial identity so as to not disrupt the audience’s expectations. His concern for his image highlights his savviness toward the marketing of authorial identity. White believed, “Tao Lin is eccentric but has an ability to manipulate the strings of social dynamics, an aggressiveness apparent in his many attempts to actively frame his story, in an online gregariousness that has made him the center of a ‘scene.’”⁴³⁸ Consistently during the interview, Lin coerced White into not focusing on his drug use, while at the same time allowing himself to be profiled taking drugs

⁴³⁸ White. The “scene” White referred to was Alt-lit. Lin has been placed at the forefront of this literary and artistic scene by media outlets and other cultural figures. White defined Alt-lit as “a community of (hundreds, if not thousands, of) writers who publish online and have been connected to Lin. They publish poems on Twitter, they Instagram photos of white powders lined up on chapbooks. (The Tumblr blog *Alt Lit Gossip*, names Lin its “crown prince.”).”

See A.D Jameson, “Theory of Prose & Better Writing (ctd.): The New Sincerity, Tao Lin, & ‘Differential Perceptions,’” *HTMLGiant*, May 28, 2012. In this critical post, Jameson placed Lin within the literary school of New Sincerity, which developed out of David Foster Wallace’s theories on literature expressed in his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” from 1993. Jameson defined New Sincerity and linked Lin’s aesthetics to his definition. Jameson claimed, “Lin’s writing, as well as most New Sincerist writing, will look just as mannered and artificial as the minimalist realists of the 1970s and 80s.” Ultimately, Jameson believed that the pushbacks on Lin and other aesthetically similar authors were misguided because they were reacting to something new and disruptive to literary culture.

See also Rozalia Jovanovic, “The Surface of Things: The Rumpus Long Interview with Tao Lin,” *The Rumpus*, September 29, 2009. In this interview, Lin presented his views on “schools” of literature and why he did not find them useful as categories.

for a mainstream culture website. White mentioned how Lin decided what drugs to take before their interview, how he believed he was healthy because he chose to eat fruits and vegetables, and how he was reluctant to have the story focus on his drug use. At the end of the profile, Lin repeated the sentence, “I can’t escape the drug theme.”⁴³⁹ Taken with the context of the entire profile, this is not a plea for help; it is a shrewd appeal to the audience. Lin manipulates White to focus on his drug use and how it is tied to his authorial identity and *Taipei*. Lin masters this conscious steering of the interviewer and audience.

The desire for consistency came into focus in Lin’s “How to Give a Reading on Mushrooms,” as well. He ended by discussing how to maintain composure while signing books high: “Notice you’re drawing oval eyes instead of round eyes on some hamsters, which has never happened before, and earnestly think ‘brand, your brand.’ Fear egregious mistakes like writing ‘to Tao/from Tao.’”⁴⁴⁰ The end shows his concern with “‘brand.’” One could argue that this hyper-attention could be a side-effect of taking mushrooms, but a more accurate interpretation is Lin, although under the influence of drugs, knows maintaining consistency in his authorial identity/“brand” is necessary in the literary marketplace. His repetitive thoughts about Hunter S. Thompson and his attention to hiding the fact that he is on mushrooms reveal he is conscious of his performance, and the presentation of these facets of his mind on maintaining his “‘brand’” illuminates his concern to preserve his image. He knows that to create a place in literary culture authors must have distinctive characteristics attached to them to create audience interest. The dedications and hamsters Lin drew were just as significant to representing him as his literary works.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Lin, “How to Give a Reading on Mushrooms.”

He knows he must act according to the images he created and circulated to maintain his identity as an eccentric author. The identity he established through his blog and early online media presences must be represented in physical form through acts such as readings, book signings, and interviews. The need to preserve his “brand” illuminates how the literary marketplace has altered how writers think of themselves. Much like the comment from Costa on Lin’s blog about owning a piece of him, the fans at his reading expect to receive, through his drawings and signatures in their books, an accurate representation.

The construction and maintenance of brands are not solely an individual endeavor, of course. Lin’s peers maintain his “brand” online, too. Noah Cicero, someone Lin claimed “influences...his early fiction,”⁴⁴¹ depicted Lin as a natural authorial extension from David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Bret Easton Ellis. In “Ellis/DFW/Franzen vs. Lin/Zambreno/Pink,” published on *Thought Catalog*, Cicero categorized Lin as “a revolutionary” author as opposed to “a rebel,” which he considered Wallace, Franzen, and Ellis.⁴⁴² Picking up from the call Wallace issued at the end of “E Unibus Pluram” for a new group of American authors to move beyond Postmodernism’s aesthetics and find new ways to approach literature and society, Cicero condemned Wallace, Franzen, and Ellis’s reliance on the continued critique of literary culture as a form of self-promotion that did not “actually influence anything.”⁴⁴³ Cicero believed Lin, Zambreno, and Pink were different because “by writing their own personal

⁴⁴¹ Jovanovic.

⁴⁴² Noah Cicero, “Ellis/DFW/Franzen vs. Lin/Zambreno/Pink,” *Thought Catalog*, December 9, 2013, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://thoughtcatalog.com/noah-cicero/2013/12/ellisdfwfranz-en-vs-linzambrenopink-2/>.

⁴⁴³ Ibid. Later in this chapter, I will address Lin’s critiques of the state of literature and authorship in the U.S. Lin places these critiques in print media, which mirrors the traditional publication methods of Wallace, Franzen, and other “older” contemporary authors.

experiences, they are declaring ‘I own my experience,’” and that “most of all their answers are temporary, timely and insufficient.”⁴⁴⁴ Lin, for Cicero, was more akin to Romantic spontaneity and an overflowing of emotion than Wallace, Franzen, and Ellis. Cicero asserted, “They [Lin/Zambreno/Pink] experience ‘something’ and have an incredible emotion concerning that experience, and they have to write it out, they have to get it out of them, as a form of therapy for themselves.” In this manner, Lin became an heir to the styles of “Kerouac, Bukowski, Hunter S. Thompson, Natsume Soseki or Jean Rhys.” Like these authors, Lin, Zambreno, and Pink were “messy or even noisy writers” and heavily used “vernacular to highly stylized writing.” Cicero saw these aspects of Lin’s authorship as disruptions of the status quo rather than an act of faux rebellion like Wallace, Franzen, and Ellis.

The final claim Cicero made firmly established Lin as a member of the group Wallace desired. Although he criticized Wallace, Franzen, Ellis and other Generation X cultural figures for not doing enough in their art to fight against commercialism’s effects on the individual, society, and culture, Cicero commended them “for putting up the Good Fight.” Nevertheless, this was not an acceptance of their authorial identities or aesthetics: “But you lost, and now we need new methods.” The “new methods” came from Lin, Zambreno, and Pink. Lin and the others became a group of revolutionaries who “f[ound] nothing in a particular value system worthwhile, and create[d] their own value system and [went] to the left or right of the object that oppresse[d] them,” for Cicero. This nihilistic definition of “a revolutionary” supported how Lin presented himself online since the beginning of his career and aptly defined how he used these presences to circumvent the conventional literary world.

In the next section, I take a closer look at Lin's use of social media. The multiple accounts he maintains create an affinity between his followers and him, while at the same time adding to his performance of the author as digital eccentric. In attempting to make sense of Lin, White contended, "Maybe the allure is in part a fascination with Lin himself—his personality is impossible to separate from his work."⁴⁴⁵ White described Lin's authorial identity as "a personality that multiplies and dissolves into itself, all of the Lins somehow forming a single image."⁴⁴⁶ Social media provides him another way to fracture his authorship.

The Tao of Social Media

Social media offers Lin another way to present himself directly to his audience. The audience has a direct line of communication with him that establishes a feeling of intimacy. This provides them with insight into his authorial identity, while at the same time allowing him the mediated distance of other communication technologies. However, his social media presences demonstrate a shift in how writers become authors in the twenty-first-century. As Ian Sansom of *The Guardian* claims, "Tao Lin is one of the first writers to have been formed not through traditional page and print culture but in and through social media and the internet."⁴⁴⁷ Lin curates his social media, not his literary agent or publisher. He writes his posts and uploads from his own devices. This is directly opposite to more prestigious authors, such as Jonathan Franzen. Lin's social media presences provide the platforms that directly shape his image as a digital eccentric.

⁴⁴⁵ White.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Ian Sansom, "Taipei by Tao Lin—Review," *The Guardian*, July 4, 2013, accessed May 8, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/04/taipei-tao-lin-review>.

Like his other digital performances, consistency is essential to Lin's social media presences. Across his main accounts, he uses the same avatar—an ice-blue square.⁴⁴⁸ Sheila Heti, in *The Believer*, claimed, “With Tao Lin, the persona and the person seem to have no fault lines—whether in his poetry, in comments sections on articles about him, in emails or on Twitter, his tone is consistent, original, interesting, and always accompanied by his avatar, that Daiquiri Ice blue square.”⁴⁴⁹ On his Tumblr, Lin answered a fan question about this avatar: “I like the color. I’m glad for this profile picture because otherwise I wouldn’t know what to use and probably [would] frequently change it and feel worried about it, like I do other aspects of my internet presence. I don’t remember my thoughts when I chose it in 2008.”⁴⁵⁰ Lin reveals the self-consciousness he has toward his digital image. The color connotes peace and tranquility, and also, makes him abstract by replacing his visual image. It is difficult to believe his description of how he chose it because he acts aloof to his own intentions, and his performances are meticulously crafted. Nevertheless, his candid nature about not becoming consumed by constantly updating his profile pictures mirrors his claims about concentrating on writing over other components of daily life.

⁴⁴⁸ See figure 1, screen shot of Tao Lin’s Twitter page with ice-blue avatar/profile picture, accessed July 18, 2017, https://twitter.com/tao_lin.

⁴⁴⁹ Sheila Heti, “What Would Twitter Do?,” *The Believer*, July 8, 2014, accessed May 5, 2017, <https://logger.believermag.com/post/2014/07/09/what-would-twitter-do-8>.

⁴⁵⁰ Tao Lin, *Tao Lin*, Tumblr, last modified 2017, <http://www.taolin.info/>. Lin’s Tumblr becomes his main website/blog in August 2013.

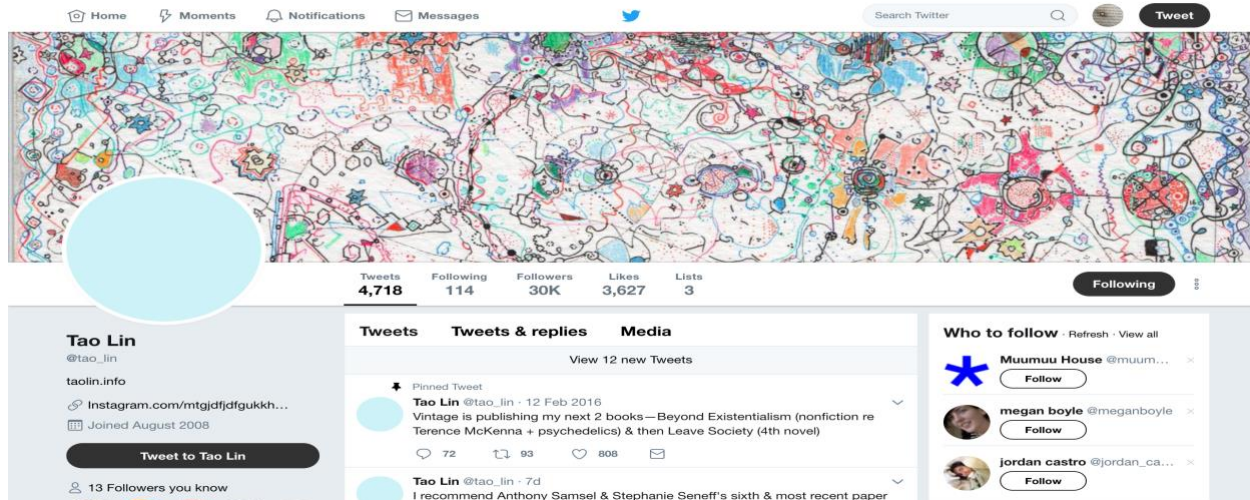


Fig. 1: Screen shot of Lin’s Twitter page with ice-blue avatar/profile picture, accessed July 18, 2017, https://twitter.com/tao_lin.

His Facebook breaks the consistent use of the ice-blue avatar. Instead of providing his “friends” with his standard avatar, he uses an actual photograph as his profile picture.⁴⁵¹ It shows Lin with glasses and a mustache. He wears a black shirt and stands in front of a white wall with a red symbol. The caption attributes the image to “<http://www.ego-maps.com/>.” It is interesting Lin chooses to not include his standard avatar on Facebook. The absence of the identifier disrupts the consistent abstraction of him across all his other social media and downplays Facebook as a platform for his authorial performance.

⁴⁵¹ See figure 2, screen shot of Tao Lin’s Facebook profile picture, accessed July 18, 2017. The photographer is unclear, since www.ego-maps.com takes the visitor to a collection of NSFW images; Lin’s image is tame compared to the other images on the website. The thumbnails on the site reveal people who are photographed to represent the most hedonistic and egotistical aspects of their identities. Lin’s image does not appear on the site, which leads me to conclude that the photograph was taken as a separate project.

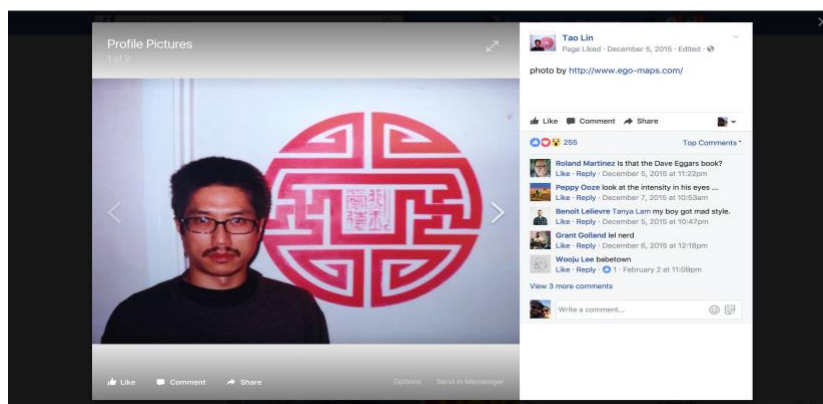


Fig. 2: Screen shot of Lin’s Facebook profile picture, accessed July 18, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/taolin1983/photos/a.442609937480.229331.71027832480/10153874536852481/?type=1&theater>.

Lin’s irregularity in updating his Facebook shows he is not as invested in the platform. The majority of posts link to articles and YouTube videos associated with his current book projects and/or research interests. The creative projects he does include are mostly images of his visual art on Tumblr. He does provide a few instances of literary works, two poems published on the website *New York Tyrant* and another to a bibliography for his upcoming nonfiction book *Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change* (Vintage, 2018).⁴⁵² These links advertise him, his art, and his interests. Instead of being a direct reference to his authorial identity, Lin’s Facebook provides his “friends” and other visitors a chance to construct a representation of Lin through other media texts.

Other social media offer him the opportunity to perform his authorship in a more creative manner than Facebook. The video sharing communities of YouTube and Vimeo provide Lin a space to experiment with recorded images. Like Facebook, which he does not include a link for in the about sections of his YouTube and Vimeo channels (Lin does provide links to all his other

⁴⁵² This upcoming nonfiction book was referred to as *Beyond Existentialism* until July 25, 2017.

social media), he has decreased his use of these platforms. Although he does not post regularly, YouTube and Vimeo serve as visual digital representations of Lin's authorial identity as an eccentric.

The pinned video on Lin's YouTube channel depicts him trolling a live audience. The video, entitled "Tao Lin reading (Brooklyn 2008)," recorded him reading his poem "i went fishing with my family when i was five," which began by telling what each family member caught and when the family ate it. The majority of the poem repeats the line "the next night we ate whale" four thousand times, but he condenses this for the reading.⁴⁵³ The poem tests the endurance of the reader/listener. Lin added to this test with his awkwardness and tone while reading. The audience in the video expected the traditions of public readings to be supported because the literary world has encoded these rules in their minds. He, on the other hand, broke the rules of author readings through the continual repetition of "and the next night we ate whale." Through this performative act, Lin, again, places himself against professionalism.

He did not appear in the video, only his voice could be heard from behind the camera, making this video another abstraction. The video emphasized audience members, specifically two women and one man. These three people exhibited moments of excitement, laughter, confusion, and dismay as he continually repeated "the next night we ate whale." Their facial

⁴⁵³ Tao Lin, "i went fishing with my family when i was five," *MonkeyBicycle*, n.d., accessed July 18, 2017, <http://monkeybicycle.net/old-archive/Lin/poem.html>. The space available for the numerous repetitions of "the next night we ate whale" is dependent on the way webpages function. Unlike the limited space of print media, webpages offer Lin the opportunity to expand his poem beyond the size and space dimensions of print. In his first poetry collection, *you are a little bit happier than i am*, the poem "4:30 a.m." uses a similar repetition. The line "i am fucked existentially" is repeated sixty times. The speaker urges the reader to "please keep reading" and finally states "thank you for reading my poem" at the end, unlike the speaker in "i went fishing...." These pleading gestures suggest that the speaker desires the reader's attention and wants them to persevere through the continual repetition for a payoff that ultimately never comes.

expressions changed throughout, and they became exhausted from hearing the line over and over. They were confused; they seemed to wonder if Lin was being genuine or comedic. He stated at the beginning, “I wanna read from my memoir,” which placed this absurd poem in reality, while at the same time poking fun at the faux-realism typically associated with certain nonfiction writing. The audience understood this and found it hilarious. However, this changed quickly because the repetition was extremely absurd, but also realistic. The audience members, especially the three in the foreground, experienced this performance as a test of their endurance and conceptions of literary art. Their position as supporters of the arts became strained when Lin forced them to confront their definitions of literature with his absurd poem, and this produced discomfort.

The other videos posted on YouTube and Vimeo were an eclectic mix of footage from readings, family gatherings, and snippets of his life in New York City. Taken together they reveal Lin as an author willing to experiment in more than one medium, but they also reveal a person not fully devoted to crafting visual pleasure with film. YouTube provides him with a means to disseminate his eccentric videos directly to his audience without funding from film producers. Lin and his ex-wife Megan Boyle started a film company in 2010 and their film *Mumblecore* (2011) was distributed on YouTube. The film chronicled Lin and Boyle’s relationship through their spontaneous wedding in Las Vegas.⁴⁵⁴ The entire film used a MacBook as the camera. The merging of the film apparatus with communication technology created the aesthetic of a home movie, while at the same time presenting the viewer with depictions of them through their own view. In an interview with *The Fader*, Lin stated that the use of a MacBook created “a viewable perspective” where “for once you can see what someone else is seeing,

⁴⁵⁴ Lin fictionalized this and other moments during their relationship in *Taipei*.

except it's a computer."⁴⁵⁵ Many of the shots showed them in front of the MacBook's web-cam, which provided a voyeuristic intrusion but also intimacy. Toward the end of the film, when they were in Las Vegas, Lin and Boyle ingested drugs and had an in-depth conversation about their relationship in a darkened part of a casino.⁴⁵⁶ During the segment, Boyle continually touched the MacBook, possibly waking the computer, adjusting the web-cam's features, or multitasking by checking email, chats, or the web. This visual of their conversation with the disruptions by Boyle made the audience feel as though they were sitting directly across from them.

The semblance of intimacy merged with the technology and its ability to capture and disseminate the footage directly. Lin admitted to the website *Indie Wire* that filming with little to no budget made him and Boyle resourceful in how they approached their art, and he claimed that the lack of funding provided them with the "freedom to do whatever we want, no obligations to other people who give us money to get a producer credit and try to influence us to do things like change an ending or something."⁴⁵⁷ This affected their use of technology: "If I were rich though I think I would've still preferred using a MacBook...because with a camera it seems like you need to hold it in front of you or in the air or something and like point it at people, but with a MacBook you can just hold it like a bag or something against your body or set it on a table or something and it's not conspicuous."⁴⁵⁸ This statement illuminated how he approached film as

⁴⁵⁵ Emilie Friedlander, "Interview: Tao Lin." *The Fader*, June 4, 2013, accessed May 10, 2017, <http://www.thefader.com/2013/06/04/interview-tao-lin>.

⁴⁵⁶ See figure 3, MDMAfilms, *Mumblecore* (2011), YouTube video, 1:24:57, June 30, 2015, <https://youtu.be/Mcj0wrLBDoE>.

⁴⁵⁷ "Drugs Meet Movies: Tao Lin and Megan Boyle's MDMAfilms," *Indie Wire*, August 10, 2011, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.indiewire.com/2011/08/interview-drugs-meet-movies-tao-lin-and-megan-boyles-mdmafilms-52875/>.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

both an art and authorial performance. By viewing film equipment as foreign objects, he found most film techniques to be hindrances on spontaneous creation. This fit with the Romantic traits associated with Lin. Because he could capture life as it happened without the intrusion of film equipment, he was able to present a less mediated version of it, one that supported the prevailing images already circulating in the literary world.

Lin's Instagram serves as another self-curated visual record of his eccentricities. The ice-blue avatar is his profile picture, but instead of his actual name as his username, Lin uses a nonsense screen name: mtgjdfjdfgukkhddtyhcffghhvdgyg.⁴⁵⁹ His username visually represents random space-filler or typing, and it offers no insight into labeling him beside its association with the ice-blue avatar and the trollish antics of his past. The profile description plays upon this abstraction by asking, "How do I get @tao_lin or @taolin."⁴⁶⁰ The hyperlinked usernames take the visitor to an Instagram profile that has no posts (@tao_lin) and one that is private (@taolin). Lin's coyness in the construction of his Instagram profile highlights how he wants to be seen as a "digital eccentric." It provides him a space to be playful with how we as audiences interpret visual texts and attribute meaning to names. By removing his name, substituting randomness for control, and relying on the ice-blue avatar as his main identifier, he tests his audience's attention to detail and pushes away followers who are not familiar with his antics.

⁴⁵⁹ The date Lin adopted this username cannot be determined. Since username changes update each post with the current username, all of Lin's posts are attributed to his current username.

⁴⁶⁰ Tao Lin, Tao Lin (@mtgjdfjdfgukkhddtyhcffghhvdgyg), Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/mtgjdfjdfgukkhddtyhcffghhvdgyg/>.



Fig. 3: Screenshot of Lin and Boyle, MDMAfilms, *Mumblecore* (2011), YouTube video, 1:24:57, June 30, 2015, <https://youtu.be/Mcj0wrLBDoE>.

Instagram, however, gives a closer look at Lin's performance through numerous photographs. Some of his most recent activity on the site features photographs of him at various locations in Taipei. A post from January 23, 2017 showed him, his parents, and their dog Dudu posing on an observatory.⁴⁶¹ It appeared like a normal family photograph, but Lin's facial expression disrupted this semblance of normalcy. He created awkwardness with his smile. His teeth were bared, and his mouth was contorted. Lin's eyes added to his maladroit appearance. They were open wide, making him appear deranged. Lin held his body stiffly, and his hands were in his pockets. He looked like he was being held hostage. The awkward body language suggests the feeling of distance from his parents, but it also represents his out-of-place role in literary culture. Lin's posture and facial expression represent the public image he has constructed.

⁴⁶¹ See figure 4, screen shot of Tao Lin, his parents, and Dudu, Tao Lin (@mtgjdfjdfgukkhddtyhcfghhvdgy), Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/mtgjdfjdfgukkhddtyhcfghhvdgy/>.

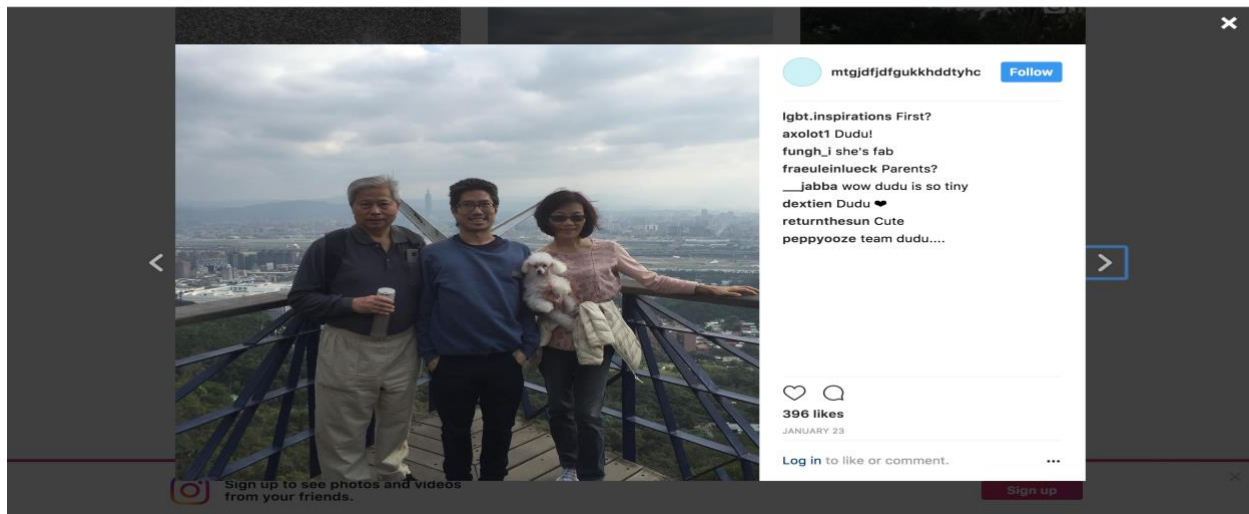


Fig. 4: Screen shot of Tao Lin, his parents, and Dudu, Tao Lin (@mtgjdfjdfgukkhddtyhcffghhvdfyg), Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/mtgjdfjdfgukkhddtyhcffghhvdfyg/>.

Another main social media for Lin is the blogging platform Tumblr. He moved *Reader of Depressing Books/hehehehehehehehehehehehe* from Blogger to Tumblr in 2013, and renamed the site taolin.info, making it more professional than its previous versions. His Tumblr appears as a straightforward author website. Unlike more prestigious authors, Lin maintains his Tumblr and controls the flow of content. This reinforces his desire to present himself against traditional authorship. His Tumblr provides a glimpse into his identity as both a visual artist and eccentric author. His visual art is featured on pages two and three of the site and anchored to a page that contains more of his Mandalas; other links direct visitors to his Photoshop drawings and photographs, which have appeared in *Vice*. Tumblr serves as a digital image of Lin as an author. Referring to his first blog, but also applicable to Tumblr, he claimed, "...[O]n my blog it's really how I am. I feel like that's what I'm thinking just not what I'm saying. Because it's too hard to

talk like that. People would just stare at me.”⁴⁶² Using the site as a way to fully express himself as an author furnishes him with the platform needed to perform the author as a digital eccentric.

Although he highlights this feature early on, the remainder of the site focuses on capturing his authorial identity. His interactions with his audience range from descriptions of his aesthetics to questions about where he would like to travel to comments about hamsters. Instead of ignoring his critics, Lin includes some examples of the popular dismissals of him as an author. One commenter, who posted anonymously, asked Lin, “Do you ever wish you could just shoplift some literary talent?”⁴⁶³ Lin responded flatly, “nope.” Including his critics’ opinions of his works and his authorial identity lets him perform against the backdrop of all the representations circulating in literary culture. Very easily, he could have wiped his Tumblr of critical remarks. This would have allowed him to present a refined professional image, yet he chooses not to remove them because embracing controversy fits with his performance.

Other notable interactions involve him engaging literary culture. Commenters seek Lin’s explanations about his writing process and his advice on editing and publishing. One commenter wanted to know specifically Lin’s opinion on “‘The Novel’ as a thing.”⁴⁶⁴ Instead of addressing the question directly, Lin linked to a page entitled “Some Non-Exclusive, To Varying Degrees Synergistic Reasons for Me to Write Novels (a List in Progress).” The link was a performative act. The text provided a mediated answer, which removed spontaneity and replaced it with a

⁴⁶² Emily Nonko, “Shoplifting from Ann Beattie: An Interview with Tao Lin,” *BOMB*, May 11, 2009, accessed May 8, 2017. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/4529/shoplifting-from-ann-beattie-an-interview-with-tao-lin>.

⁴⁶³ Tao Lin, *Tao Lin*, Tumblr, last modified 2017, <http://www.taolin.info/>, 90.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

controlled response that carried more communication consequences.⁴⁶⁵ Clarifying what he meant by online conversations as more consequential than “real life” conversations, Lin told James Yeh of *Vice*, “But if they type something online, it just seems more...real. Because they had to think about it, and then had time to look at it on the screen, and then had time to edit it. ... So actually it seems more consequential.”⁴⁶⁶ The text he provided and the text the commenter provided entwine them in the creation of meaning. By linking to a written and edited text, Lin ensured that his role in this online conversation was a clear representation of his authorship.

“Some Non-Exclusive, To Varying Degrees Synergistic Reasons for Me to Write Novels (a List in Progress)” supplied the reader with forty-four items justifying Lin’s views on literature. Contained in this list were examples that placed him firmly within the Romantic traditions. He wrote that he used novels “to investigate, use, learn about, and play with language,” and later in the list he claimed that literature provided him with a way “[t]o explore examine, study, scrutinize, correct, create, and alter memories.”⁴⁶⁷ His autobiographical fiction serves as his method of playing with memory and time, fictionalizing his mind and its perceptions of the world around him. Chuck Leung contended, “Lin is an existential writer, really, less interested in tracing the contours of his particular social group than in describing the very personal and sometimes unbearable tyranny of one’s own mind—and what it requires (sometimes measured in

⁴⁶⁵ James Yeh, “Tao Lin Is Clean, Energetic, Powerful,” *Vice*, November 24, 2010, accessed May 5, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/tao-lin-is-clean-energetic-powerful.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Tao Lin, *Tao Lin*, Tumblr, last modified 2017, <http://www.taolin.info/>, 36. The blog post is unavailable from the homepage or other links. It can only be found through the link Lin provides on page thirty-six of his Tumblr.

mg doses) to venture out in search of others.”⁴⁶⁸ Lin approached his autobiographical fiction from the idea that he was attempting “to achieve an effect” through manipulating his memories, and everything in the work, whether real or fiction, was composed “in the service of the effect.”⁴⁶⁹ It is this use of literature to explore memory and time that allows Lin the opportunities to experiment artistically. This experimental role and the misunderstandings that go along with this type of authorship directly link him to the Romantic tradition.

In addition to these social media, Twitter acts as one of Lin’s primary media for his authorial performance. Many critics find Lin’s print works and his Twitter to be synonymous. Witt considered his Twitter and novels to “complement one another” and that both were “equally” pleasing.”⁴⁷⁰ Witt’s pleasure from reading not only Lin’s print works but also his tweets shows his abilities as a writer are not specifically tied to a traditional literary medium. Lin uses Twitter “as a medium for deeper reflection,” Andrea Longini contends, which “allows him to chronicle over time, in short bursts, his hunger: for occasional carbs, for organic food, for a highly curated selection of media, and, mostly [sic] importantly to parse out and make sense of his life.”⁴⁷¹ Answering a question on Tumblr about why he had not deleted Twitter, Lin stated, “I don’t think I’m going to delete mine. I do think I’m going to continue to feel the urge

⁴⁶⁸ Chuck Leung, “No One Is Special,” *Slate*, June 7, 2013, accessed May 15, 2017, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2013/06/tao_lin_s_taipei_reviewed_techy_drug_fueled_existential_fiction.single.html.

⁴⁶⁹ “Interview with Tao Lin,” *Redivider*.

⁴⁷⁰ Witt.

⁴⁷¹ Andrea Longini, “Telegraph Coherence: *Selected Tweets* by Mira Gonzalez and Tao Lin,” *Electric Lit*, May 25, 2015, accessed June 1, 2017, <https://electricliterature.com/telegraphing-coherence-selected-tweets-by-mira-gonzalez-and-tao-lin-6d05670a7a5c>.

periodically, to varying degrees, for the rest of my life.”⁴⁷² Twitter becomes an authorial tool for observation and expression much like print does for other writers, and he views Twitter affecting how he thinks.⁴⁷³

He has maintained as many as seven Twitter accounts over the course of his career. These have ranged from his primary and longest running one, @tao_lin, to one based solely around his parents, @tao_linparents.⁴⁷⁴ These multiple Twitter accounts provide Lin with the chance to experiment with his performance. In a post on @tao_lin, he tweeted that one of the ways he approached multiple Twitter accounts was through considering them heteronyms, along the lines of Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet*.⁴⁷⁵ Lin wondered what Pessoa would have done if he had Twitter because not only did he create elaborate texts authored by multiple personae, but he composed much of *The Book of Disquiet* on nontraditional materials, like scrap paper and other ephemera. It was through this lens that Lin constructed his numerous accounts, although the names of them were slight modifications of his primary account name. He described this

⁴⁷² Tao Lin, *Tao Lin*, Tumblr, last modified 2017, <http://www.taolin.info/>, 32. Another reference toward Twitter’s importance in Lin’s authorial identity is his strategic linking to his Twitter on all his social media. The link is a constant breadcrumb on every page of Lin’s Tumblr. In about or info sections of Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Vimeo, and SoundCloud, @tao_lin is prominently displayed so Lin’s followers can access this platform.

⁴⁷³ Friedlander.

⁴⁷⁴ Lin deactivated some of his accounts—@tao_linunedited, @tao_lin2, @tao_lin8, and @tao_lin33. However, Lin collected some of the tweets from these accounts in *Selected Tweets* (Short Flight/Long Drive Books, 2015). On deleting the account @tao_lin33, Lin tweeted on @tao_lin3, “i deleted @tao_lin33 a few days ago because i felt like i had more twitter accounts than i currently had at the time...” (7:23 PM, September 9, 2013). @tao_lin3 is still active. Unlike @tao_lin, @tao_lin3 has been used recently in a similar way to Lin’s Facebook, with posting related to articles he has read on various topics.

⁴⁷⁵ Tao Lin, @tao_lin, Twitter post, April 28, 2016, 3:04 PM, https://twitter.com/tao_lin/status/725762510838730756. The tweet manipulated Twitter’s character limit. Lin tweeted a screen shot of a Word document, which allowed him to present more information than the standard 140-characters of a tweet.

approach more fully in an interview with *Electric Lit* while promoting the publication of *Selected Tweets*, ironically published in print:

I think the earliest second account I made was @tao_lin2, which I made because I wanted to be a different person on Twitter with a different account. The profile info was something like ‘Not better. Not worse. Not the same. Just different.’ I made @tao_linunedited at some point because I wanted to tweet tweets I wouldn’t edit—tweets I wouldn’t, before tweeting it, consider whether to tweet it or not, or if I could explain the feeling or thought or whatever more accurately or concisely, or not.⁴⁷⁶

Social media’s ability to present people through conscious manipulation of their lives furnishes Lin with a platform to explore how he performs his identity as not only an author but also as a regular person. The profile description he gives for @tao_lin2 displays how he considers this other account to function as a representation of his authorship. Heti asked Lin whether there existed “a persona or a fictional Tao Lin” within his Twitter presences, since his tweets “seem to come from a consistent universe.” His response broke with his earlier conviction that consistency in self-presentation was one of his main goals: “To me, at this point, I think I’ve found that I don’t want to think about whether anything is fictional, nonfictional, a persona, not a persona, authentic, not authentic, true, not true.”⁴⁷⁷ Lin is skeptical of boundaries and the limitations they place upon art. Since his authorial identity operates as performance art, he, naturally, pushes back on the idea that it can be restricted. Twitter allows him to play with the presentation of his identity across multiple accounts. The performance of his authorial identity through Twitter acts as a way for him to maintain prevailing images, while at the same time breaking down those representations.

⁴⁷⁶ Juliet Escoria, “Interview with Tao Lin,” *Electric Lit*, June 3, 2013, accessed May 5, 2017, <https://electricliterature.com/interview-with-tao-lin-adb3bd2d2c36>.

⁴⁷⁷ Heti.

Lin admits that he is self-consciousness over his appearance on Twitter. This links his use of the platform to the same feelings that many traditional writers have over their representations in print. According to Lin, altering his writing style on Twitter made him self-conscious, and this shift in textual appearance disrupted the consistency he maintained.⁴⁷⁸ Although he admits to not worrying about a consistent textual performance, @tao_lin displays his authorial identity consistently by promoting his career. Currently, Lin's Twitter features a pinned tweet stating his next books will be published by Vintage.⁴⁷⁹ The tweet becomes a promotional tool allowing him to keep his audience aware of his work, while at the same time implying his and the work's importance through their association with a mainstream publisher. Similar to how he seems validated by Vintage in other publications, Lin's choice to highlight it at the top of Twitter reveals that print publication still holds a prominent place in his authorial performance.

Much of the recent activity on his Twitter has focused on his editing process for his upcoming book. On July 25, 2017, Lin tweeted, "Beyond Existentialism is now titled Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change & will be out in probably May 2018."⁴⁸⁰ Numerous times over the past two years, he mentioned this nonfiction book, and throughout the process, he tweeted screen shots of his editing and of his bibliography. His tweets about the development of this book place value on Twitter as a platform for literary promotion and also authorial identity performance. Sharing updates on his work becomes a way for Lin to keep his audience informed. This sharing also illuminates his authorial identity by granting them a closer look at his writing

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Lin, @tao_lin, Twitter post, February 12, 2016, 11:14 AM, https://twitter.com/tao_lin/status/698178411634659329.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., July 25, 2017, 10:30 AM, https://twitter.com/tao_lin/status/889855424744366080.

process. He tweeted on May 17, 2016, “My editing process includes staring at the screen thinking ‘fuck...’ then tweeting this and going back to other screen to keep trying.”⁴⁸¹ It could be argued Lin is being coy by casting himself in a non-authorial manner, and that this is proof of his tactlessness and ability to annoy.

However, in tweeting this, he revealed to his followers he was a dedicated professional. Benjamin Lytal claimed, “Mr. Lin made rigor seem like laziness,” and that Lin “spent 140 hours revising *Taipei* after the book was in galleys.”⁴⁸² This glimpse into his editing process for *Taipei* and his tweet foreground the ambition that is obscured by his eccentric performances. Lin asserted that his drive to be represented as a serious author was something that was an auxiliary to his Twitter presence:

But yeah, I’m not ambitious. Ambition’s just a side effect. Of wanting to...oh my god. Like if a lot of people know about me when I tweet something, the reaction will be bigger. Which is exciting to me. In part because like, everyone will see that one tweet is doing something. And if someone sees someone’s doing something, and it’s affecting one person, or it’s affecting a thousand people, that person will feel more excited if it’s affecting a thousand people.⁴⁸³

His desire to share his work and let his audience in on his writing process becomes a way to perform authorship in real-time. Instead of the isolation of print, Twitter allows Lin to perform directly alongside his audience’s reactions. According to White, “Lin is positive about sharing writing on social media,” and she contended that his view of the platform ran counter to popular

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., May 17, 2016, 11:50 PM, https://twitter.com/tao_lin/status/732780330483101696.

⁴⁸² Benjamin Lytal, “Gchat Is a Noble Pursuit: Tao Lin’s Modernist Masterpiece,” *Observer*, June 4, 2013, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://observer.com/2013/06/gchat-is-a-noble-pursuit-tao-lins-modernist-masterpiece/>.

⁴⁸³ Levack.

connotations about how Twitter was mainly a site for “sharing links.”⁴⁸⁴ As Witt claimed, “‘Tao Lin,’ the collected textual output of the Tao Lin I follow on the Web, was one of my favorite ‘books’ before I had even read *Shoplifting From American Apparel*, *Richard Yates*, or any of Lin’s other works.”⁴⁸⁵ Statements like this reveal his approach to using Twitter and other social media to extend his authorial performance beyond the traditional channels of the literary world. By adapting and performing his authorship to these new media, Lin maintains a connection to his audience through maintaining his brand.

His reputation as a digital eccentric affects his reactions to being overly visible online. In a web video interview, Lin stated that he “deleted all that shit [social media presences]” while tripping on mushrooms one night, and he admitted that deleting his social media presences was liberating partially “because of mushrooms,” and that he “sort of regrets getting it back.”⁴⁸⁶ In another interview, he discussed how deleting his social media accounts provided him with a way to assess his authorship: “I needed to figure out what to do about that—all this shit that was taking up so much of my time.”⁴⁸⁷ The conflict between serious literary endeavors and lowbrow/popular writing shows that even someone who considers social media a valuable tool for authorial expression regrets the amount of energy and time one spends on them. That being

⁴⁸⁴ White.

⁴⁸⁵ Witt.

⁴⁸⁶ Christian Lorentzen, “Tao Lin Talks to Christian Lorentzen,” *Tank*, no. 59 (September 12, 2013), accessed May 5, 2017, <http://tankmagazine.com/issue-59/talk/tao-lin-talks-to-christian-lorentzen/>. See also Richard Godwin, “Fiction for Facebookers: Tao Lin and the Art of Alt-Lit,” *Evening Standard*, August 23, 2013.

⁴⁸⁷ Richard Godwin, “Fiction for Facebookers: Tao Lin and the Art of Alt-Lit,” *Evening Standard*, August 23, 2013, accessed June 7, 2017, <http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/esmagazine/fiction-for-facebookers-tao-lin-and-the-art-of-alt-lit-8779983.html#gallery>.

said, Lin reactivated his social media accounts and immersed himself, once again, into using them to perform his authorial identity, albeit in a more professional manner to improve his viability in the literary marketplace.

Next, I turn my attention toward Lin's audio/visual representations. Lin's visual and auditory appearances trace the movement of his authorial identity from digital eccentric to mainstream publishing's "It" author. As before, he cleans up his image to appeal to a more mainstream audience, but the traces of his early career remain. Lin embraces the tension between his professional aspirations and his history as a literary oddity across audio/visual media, ultimately legitimizing his performance of authorship.

The Tao of Sound and Vision

Audio/Visual media cast Lin in contrasting roles. Early appearances reinforced his image as an eccentric, while his appearances after the publication of *Richard Yates* depicted him more seriously. Although publications and his author portraits promoted him as a significant new literary voice, other audio/visual performances sometimes clashed with this. His appearances across these media function as significant points of reference for the continued performance of the author as digital eccentric, but also depicting a writer in the continual refinement of his identity.

The publication of *Eeeee*, *Eee*, *Eeee* and *Bed* simultaneously in 2007 presented two different visual images of Lin. The author portraits for each work support his representation as an eccentric attention-grabber, which sharply breaks with the professional presentation of most authors. Instead of manicured studio portraits, Lin's suggested deviance. The image for *Eeeee*,

Eee, Eeee was a selfie.⁴⁸⁸ Taken from his laptop, the angle removed Lin's chin and most of his mouth, making it hard to gain a clear picture of his features. The most prominent components in the image were those of the subway/train-car. By setting the photograph outside of a traditional photography studio, Lin used the image to show that his authorial identity was not professionally constructed and more akin to everyday life. At the same time, it made Lin appeal to a less mainstream audience because it did not meet the traditional expectations author portraits.

With *Bed*, Lin moved further away from traditional author portraits. *Bed*'s image shattered standard representations by showing Lin flossing his teeth.⁴⁸⁹ Printed in black-and-white, it feigned artistic subversion by shocking the viewer, distorting Lin's identity, and disrupting authorial images.



Fig. 5: Author photographs, Kelly Blair, cover designer, *Eeeee, Eee, Eeee* and *Bed* (New York: Melville House, 2007).

However, taking into consideration Lin's careful planning over how he presents himself, the author portrait supports the depictions of him as a provocateur. The one for his poetry

⁴⁸⁸ See figure 5, left image, Kelly Blair, cover designer, *Eeeee, Eee, Eeee* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2007). The printed version of the author photograph is in black-and-white, while the image that appears on the Melville House website is in color.

⁴⁸⁹ See figure 5, right image, Kelly Blair, cover designer, *Eeeee, Eee, Eeee* and *Bed* (New York: Melville House, 2007).

collection *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy* in 2008 does this even more. In the picture, taken by Melville House founder Dennis Loy Johnson, Lin appeared in the foreground wearing black sunglasses, a white t-shirt, and a black hoody. The most striking feature of the image was the dog with its paw resting on a wooden railing in the left background.⁴⁹⁰ The dog's comical appearance distracts the viewer from Lin, downplaying the seriousness from his facial expression. At the same time, he over-performs hipster cool. The dark sunglasses and solemnity enhanced the disinterestedness present in his authorial identity. He does not seem to care about the awkward, comical dog behind him. Ignoring the dog and facing the camera blankly allows Lin to visually perform a playful take on the Romantic tradition. This performance extends what he had developed online. It demanded literary culture's attention by visually depicting Lin as not wanting it.

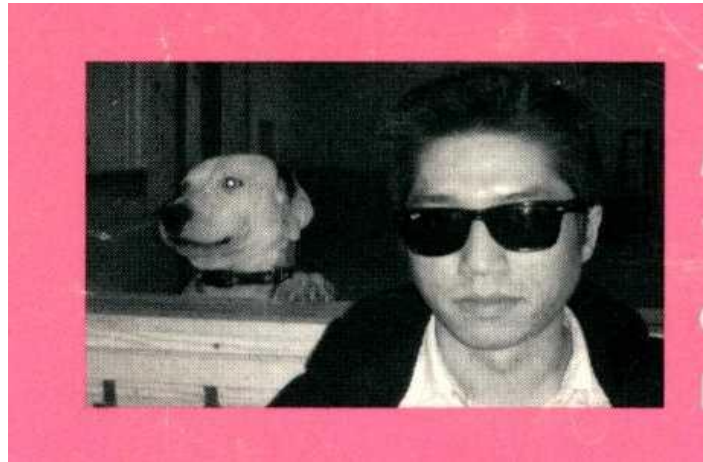


Fig. 6: Author photograph, Dennis Loy Johnson, photographer, and Kelly Blair, cover designer, *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy* (New York: Melville House, 2008).

As his performances of the author as digital eccentric drew the attention of more mainstream literary culture, he appeared in multiple publications leading up to and through the promotion of *SFAA*, which demonstrated his careful construction of his image in the literary

⁴⁹⁰ See figure 6, Dennis Loy Johnson, photographer, and Kelly Blair, cover designer, *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy* (New York: Melville House, 2008).

world. *New York Magazine* featured two images of Lin in 2009 along with the article “New Lit Boy: Tao Lin.” In the piece, Sam Anderson claimed Lin’s “aesthetic flag” lay “between art and cutesiness,” and he quoted Lin as saying, “I think most people just think I’m a gimmicky asshole,” showing his concern with representation and his desire to cast himself as a serious author.⁴⁹¹ The article did just that by positioning Lin as an author on the rise.

Notwithstanding this validation of his authorship, the accompanying photographs made Lin appear highly eccentric. The first one showed him sitting on a yoga mat drawing, which seemed like a normal representation of an author who created visual art as well.⁴⁹² Lin’s legs were exposed, and this gave the impression of him either not wearing pants or at least wearing very-short shorts. Also, he wore a light-pink dress shirt. Taken together, the combination of formal and casual attire revealed the dual aspects of Lin’s authorial identity. He desired to be taken seriously, but he constantly pushed the boundaries of professionalism.

The second photograph took his eccentricities further. This image showed him sitting inside a refrigerator, holding a bottle of wine, and eating a handful of nori.⁴⁹³ Unlike the faux-professionalism of the first photograph, the second one placed Lin firmly outside of traditional authorship, even more so than his author photograph from *Bed*. The image introduced unfamiliar audiences to his weird side. Both represented how Lin performed authorship as, according to

⁴⁹¹ Sam Anderson, “New Lit Boy: Tao Lin,” *New York Magazine*, January 11, 2009, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://nymag.com/news/features/all-new/53358/>.

⁴⁹² See figure 7, left image, The Shelby, from Sam Anderson’s “New Lit Boy: Tao Lin,” *New York Magazine*, Jan. 11 2009, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://nymag.com/news/features/all-new/53358/>.

⁴⁹³ See figure 7, right image, The Shelby, from Sam Anderson’s “New Lit Boy: Tao Lin,” *New York Magazine*, Jan. 11 2009, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://nymag.com/news/features/all-new/53358/>.

Anderson, “a world-class perpetrator of gimmickry.”⁴⁹⁴ His appearance in *New York Magazine* was another piece of performance art, trolling the magazine’s audience and over-performing the traits that had developed around his authorial identity.



Fig. 7: Eccentric Lin, The Shelby, photographer, from Sam Anderson’s “New Lit Boy: Tao Lin,” *New York Magazine*, Jan. 11 2009, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://nymag.com/news/features/all-new/53358/>.

Along with these images in a mainstream publication, Lin appeared in the art-world focused magazine *BOMB* a few months after his recognition by *New York Magazine* as the “New Lit Boy.” The photograph accompanying this appearance was another selfie, again removing the slickness behind most author images in favor of digital amateurism. The selfie showed him looking directly at the camera, holding a sickle probe.⁴⁹⁵ It doubled-down on his eccentric identity. Knowing the selfie would appear in a magazine geared toward fellow artists, Lin over-performed, something Nonko reinforced during the interview.⁴⁹⁶ He did not troll the audience

⁴⁹⁴ Anderson.

⁴⁹⁵ See figure 8, Tao Lin, photographer, from Emily Nonko’s “Shoplifting from Anne Beattie: An Interview with Tao Lin,” *BOMB*, May 11, 2009, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/4529/shoplifting-from-ann-beattie-an-interview-with-tao-lin>.

⁴⁹⁶ Nonko.

like he did in *New York Magazine*; he solidified the prevailing representations of his authorship, instead.



Fig. 8: Lin with sickle probe, Tao Lin, photographer, from Emily Nonko's "Shoplifting from Anne Beattie: An Interview with Tao Lin," *BOMB*, May 11, 2009, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/4529/shoplifting-from-ann-beattie-an-interview-with-tao-lin>.

Lin's authorial performance deepened during the promotion of *SFAA* with his first appearance on the radio show *Bookworm*, which highlighted his Romantic traits. Lin told Silverblatt that his prolific output was "a cause of me just not being very social, not really liking watching TV, and being in a situation where my publisher would just publish what I write and not tell me like a book I had written doesn't really fit in my career or something."⁴⁹⁷ His description of his ability to write is steeped in Romantic solitude. By being socially awkward and removed, Lin used art to connect and communicate. As he spoke, Lin stumbled over his words, which reinforced his social anxiety but also promoted his authenticity. Instead of becoming a different person during this interview, Lin acted awkward and shy, but also confident in how he wanted to come off to this intellectual audience.

⁴⁹⁷ Silverblatt, "Tao Lin: *Shoplifting from American Apparel*."

The dual nature of Lin's performance of the author as digital eccentric in audio/visual media became more pronounced with the publication of *Richard Yates*. Emerging across publications during the promotion for the novel was a different Lin. By shifting attention away from his eccentricities, Lin and his mediators cast him as a serious author, whose experiments with fiction stemmed from literary tradition, not trickery.

One of the first recastings occurred with a new, professional author portrait for the novel *Richard Yates*. Noah Kalina photographed Lin in a standard portrait outside in New York City.⁴⁹⁸ He wore casual clothing, but unlike the images published in *New York Magazine*, these clothes were typical public attire for a hipster. His facial expression was neutral; he stared blankly at the camera, and his lips were held tightly together. Even though there were links to previous photographs, this new image presented Lin as a professional, an author who was serious about his art and did not attempt to distract from its public reception through visual antics.



⁴⁹⁸ See figure 9, Noah Kalina, photographer, author photograph from Tao Lin's *Richard Yates* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010). Other media publications used the image in articles on Lin. See Daniel B. Roberts, "Tao Lin: Lit 'it boy' for the Internet Age," *Salon*, August 24, 2010. Other images from this photo-shoot circulated across media, too. Lin wore the same attire, but he appeared in different locations around New York City. See Zach Baron, "The Problem with Tao Lin," *The Village Voice*, September 8, 2010. This critical review of *Richard Yates* used an image of Lin sitting at a picnic table on a playground. See Charles Bock, "Young Love," *The New York Times*, September 24, 2010.

Fig. 9: Author photograph, Noah Kalina, photographer, *Richard Yates* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010).

Even though the portrait identified Lin as a serious author, other visual appearances during this time assumed the prominent representation of him. These appearances balanced out his authorial performances by, again, trolling the audience by being conscious of the publications' audiences. In the *BOMB* interview, he commented on his ideal audience: "I try to think of a hipster; I can't think of a specific person. When I think of hipsters in general, they are just people who care about what's happening now."⁴⁹⁹ Although he avoided labeling himself a hipster, Lin's attention toward a hipster audience affected the presentation of his authorship visually.

On September 30, 2010, he appeared on the cover of Seattle's *The Stranger*. It and accompanying article written by Lin parodied *Time*'s August 12, 2010 issue, which proclaimed Jonathan Franzen the Great American Novelist. According to Linda Hutcheon, parody in postmodern culture highlights "historical, social, ideological contexts" that surround cultural objects.⁵⁰⁰ His direct parody of Franzen's image—black frame glasses, grey shirt, styled hair, and Romantic stare—critiqued literary culture's representation of not only Franzen but of authorship.⁵⁰¹ For Hutcheon, parody, as an aesthetic, deconstructs the "homogenizing social notions of the monolithic (male, Anglo, white, Western) in our culture."⁵⁰² Lin stated previously that race had a lesser role to language in his literature, and he believed race and racial pride were

⁴⁹⁹ Nonko.

⁵⁰⁰ Linda Hutcheon, "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History," *Cultural Critique*, no. 5 (1986): 183, doi:10.2307/1354361.

⁵⁰¹ See figure 10, Noah Kalina, photographer, cover of *The Stranger*, Sept. 23, 2010 <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/great-american-novelist/Content?oid=4940853>.

⁵⁰² Hutcheon, 183-4.

“meaningless” to him.⁵⁰³ Although he removed racial identifiers from his literary work, Lin’s race affected how the viewer interpreted his parody of Franzen. As a U.S. citizen of Taiwanese descent, Lin does not mirror the traditional representation of American authorship. His heritage disrupts the normative perception of white male Anglo-European authorship and replaces it with a more inclusive, albeit still male, version. Lin’s cover image cast him as a serious literary author in the socio-cultural context of the United States, while at the same time allowing parody to disrupt the prevailing images within the literary world.



Fig. 10: Cover image, Noah Kalina, photographer, *The Stranger*, Sept. 23, 2010
<http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/great-american-novelist/Content?oid=4940853>.

His appearance on the YouTube show *Cooking the Books* continued his trolling of the literary world, just like *The Stranger* cover. Emily Gould, of Gawker, hosted. Since he gained attention for his trollish antics toward Gawker, his inclusion on the show illuminated the fickle nature of literary culture. Lin’s image and interaction with Gould became the focal point, making any discussion of his art and *Richard Yates* secondary to the rapport between Gould and him. He seemed nervous, shy, and aloof, while Gould was skeptical. This made the interview strange

⁵⁰³ Vizzini.

because both were stiff. It is possible that Lin is over-performing his eccentric authorship during the interview to draw attention to the prevailing image Gould helped create. Telling whether Lin was performing was difficult because later in this segment Gould jokingly told Lin that he did not have “to convey...[his enjoyment] with...[his] face,” and he responded by telling Gould he did enjoy appearing on the show and that he was “being normal right now.”⁵⁰⁴ His neutral, awkward body language is hard to interpret because it seems natural but at the same time artificial. The inability to gauge Lin’s performance shows how he has perfected his role. The end of the interview increased the awkwardness between them when they discussed cooking. Lin described how he made a kale salad “almost every night,” and that he “just [bit] off little pieces” of vegetables into the bowl instead of cutting them.⁵⁰⁵ Gould called it a “solitary meal” and urged him to make “the less anti-social” version. Her remarks highlighted a central trait of Lin’s authorial identity, that of his separateness from social life.

No matter how much he performs the role of eccentric author who skirts the mainstream, Lin, like many writers, craves a larger audience. This fault in Lin’s performance during *Cooking the Books* illuminates the dual side of his authorial identity. Although he attempts to place himself firmly against traditional conceptions of authorship, his performance makes subtle nods to the serious authorship he strives to achieve. After discussing how his works were “consciously” constructed, Lin told Gould that he did not do this to subvert the “gimmicky” label applied to him. He believed that even though audiences and publications may see him and the novel as “less serious,” this did not factor into his choices because if he “intuitively like[d] it”

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ “Cooking the Books—Episode 15—Tao Lin,” YouTube video, 10:01, posted by Cooking the Books Show, October 13, 2010, <https://youtu.be/d2BJSV8Q1Yw>.

then that was all that mattered.⁵⁰⁶ Lin's statement shows how strongly he abides by his guiding principles. He put forward that being seen as "gimmicky" and "less serious" were motivations for him, but a sliver of disappointment emerged when he discussed not being taken seriously as an author.

Despite his search for recognition, Lin could not resist mocking the literary establishment. As a regular contributor to *Vice*, he was highly aware of the publication's hipster audience, and the photograph appearing with Matthew Donahoo's article "What I know About Tao Lin's Third Novel" played directly on Lin's eccentricity. The artist Brea Souders captured him in a provocative pose.⁵⁰⁷ In the photograph, Lin reclined on a mattress and wore a black dress shirt and polka dot boxers. He held a pomegranate wedge in his right hand, as he stared blankly at the camera. The symbolism is heavy in the image. By holding the pomegranate, Lin assumes its myriad symbolic meanings, such as death, desire, and ambition, but combined with his pose, the image has strong sexual meaning. The light pink flowers on the bed sheets add to the sexual nature, making Lin an object of desire for the viewer.



Fig. 11: Seductive Lin, Brea Souders, photographer, from Matthew Donahoo's "What I know About Tao Lin's Third Novel," *Vice*, May 22, 2012, accessed May 5, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/qbw3mw/what-i-know-about-tao-lins-third-novel.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ See figure 11, Brea Souders, photographer, from Matthew Donahoo's "What I know About Tao Lin's Third Novel," *Vice*, May 22, 2012, accessed May 5, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/qbw3mw/what-i-know-about-tao-lins-third-novel.

These sexual symbols can be applied to Lin as an author. Since the article speculates on the contents of his new, unpublished novel, it helps Lin's audience in fulfilling their desire for his work and persona. The viewer is intrigued by the aura that surrounds Lin. In the accompanying article, Donahoo expressed how Lin's authorial identity and writing merged into a coherent multiple media text:

I think the most attractive thing about this novel [*Taipei*], and all of Tao's prose, for me, is that it is based in concrete reality, on actual events that occurred concerning people I am interested in and is in that way similar to a 'puzzle' or some sort of overarching work of art. As if Tao really is adhering to his belief that life is a work of art—in as much as his work extends beyond the pages of his books.... If you also take into account what is known about Tao and his beliefs, it might be true that he would encourage people to search for more information about his work, to view his life and the things he produces as one giant work of art.⁵⁰⁸

Donahoo's contextualization of Lin's art and identity make the photograph another piece of his performance art. The desire to pull out the threads of autobiography in Lin's fiction, to break down the public performances, and to follow the online presences gives his audience a consistent, never-ending text.

The convergence of Lin's presences into a singular work of art have shifted recently to focus more on him as a serious author rather than a digital eccentric. Like the author portrait from *Richard Yates*, the images circulating in literary culture with *Taipei* provide yet another attempt to romanticize Lin. With the promotional backing of Vintage Contemporaries, he must be savvy in his performances of the author as digital eccentric so as not to push away prospective audiences, but also not ostracize his fan base.

⁵⁰⁸ Matthew Donahoo, "What I Know About Tao Lin's Third Novel," *Vice*, May 22, 2012, accessed May 5, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/what-i-know-about-tao-lins-third-novel.

The author portrait for *Taipei* was not standard; it was a line-dot drawing by the illustrator Keith Witmer.⁵⁰⁹ Lin's clothes mirrored his visual style—casual, hipster attire. The eyes and mouth were the most striking parts of the drawing because they captured the passion associated with him. This image mines the characteristics often associated with serious authorship and literary history. By stripping the overt eccentricity from Lin's visual representation, Witmer played upon historical author images and their legitimizing qualities. The line-dot drawing provides a classical depiction of Lin as a serious author to help new readers accept him within the mainstream.

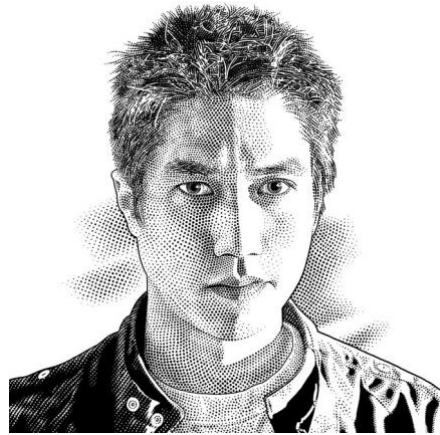


Fig. 12: Author line-dot drawing, Keith Witmer, illustrator, *Taipei* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2013).

The line-dot drawing provided Lin's larger audience with a more serious visual interpretation of his authorship, but this image was contrasted with his appearance in *Interview* magazine. The photograph, taken by Robbie Fimmano, was drastically different than any of his previous pictures. The image was highly professional, with Fimmano and stylist Miguel Enamorado creating a punk fashion aesthetic for Lin, which touched back on the Do-It-Yourself

⁵⁰⁹ See figure 12, Keith Witmer, illustrator, author photograph from Tao Lin's *Taipei* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2013).

(DIY) mentality of his early online presences.⁵¹⁰ His seductive stare mirrored the sexual aspects of his *Vice* photograph, but this image added commercial sheen. The caption did not mention Lin; instead it provided information on his clothes and the products used to achieve his look. Because *Interview* magazine focuses on fashion and culture, it is understandable that these features are promoted over a description of Lin or his art. Supplying the brand of clothes and grooming products places this image firmly within commercial culture, which in the past Lin had vehemently fought against. These features make it artificial feel. Although well-made, it becomes more about style than substance, similar to the early denunciations of Lin because of his digital antics.



Fig. 13: Fashionista Lin, Robbie Fimmano, photographer, from David Shapiro's "Tao Lin," *Interview*, June 6, 2013, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/tao-lin-1/>.

⁵¹⁰ See figure 13, Robbie Fimmano, photographer, from David Shapiro's "Tao Lin," *Interview*, June 6, 2013, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/tao-lin-1/>.



Fig. 14: Clean-cut Lin, Bryan Thomas, photographer, from Doretta Lau's "Interview: Tao Lin on 'Taipei,'" *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 5, 2013, accessed June 5, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/scene/2013/09/05/interview-tao-lin-on-taipei/>.

Closely after his appearance in *Interview*, *The Wall Street Journal* interviewed Lin. The article contained a photograph by Bryan Thomas. Unlike in *New York Magazine*, Lin was presented professionally. The picture captured Lin standing with his hands on his hips and looking directly at the camera.⁵¹¹ His attire was similar to other images, but this displayed a workman-like quality. His plaid shirt in the context of this image and the accompanying interview was not hipster apparel; it represented his diligent work ethic and dedication to his craft as an author. Lin reinforced this visual symbol by telling Lau he had "no particular inspiration" for writing *Taipei* because he needed "to do something."⁵¹² This statement and his attire portray an author who must work, must write, and must be creative, in essence, a professional. Unlike the *Interview* magazine photograph, this visual representation of Lin is more common; he becomes romanticized as a hardworking individual striving for creative success.

⁵¹¹ See figure 14, Bryan Thomas, photographer, from Doretta Lau's "Interview: Tao Lin on 'Taipei,'" *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 5, 2013, accessed June 5, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/scene/2013/09/05/interview-tao-lin-on-taipei/>.

⁵¹² Doretta Lau, "Interview: Tao Lin on 'Taipei,'" *Scene Asia, Wall Street Journal*, September 5, 2013, accessed June 5, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/scene/2013/09/05/interview-tao-lin-on-taipei/>.

Lin's move from digital eccentric to recognized literary figure was aided by his appearances in prestigious publications. *The Paris Review* validated Lin as a serious author by including him in their "My First Time" web-video series. The series, according to Dan Piepenbring, was "[i]nspired by our famous Writers at Work interviews" and "each video is a portrait of the artist as a beginner—and a look at the creative process, in all its joy, abjection, delusion, and euphoria."⁵¹³ The central word in Piepenbring's description of the series is "portrait." The video offered a glimpse at the evolution of Lin's authorial identity and his eventual recognition in the literary world. His appearance in "My First Time" provided him a chance to perform directly within literary tradition. The Tao Lin presented here distanced himself from the digital eccentric and self-promoter to become a serious author.

The video was set in Lin's apartment. Although the apartment appeared cluttered, it did not mirror the authorial identity Lin performed. He did not act awkward like in the *Cooking the Books* video. Instead, his body language showed his comfort with performing for a prestigious publication like *The Paris Review* and its audience. This allowed him to be open about his early career and the ideologies that affected him when constructing his authorial identity.

Lin's attire added to the comfort and openness he exuded. The clothes he wore were similar to his style from other visual appearances—a dark grey sweatshirt with a black collared shirt underneath. Black frame hipster glasses mirrored his parody of Jonathan Franzen.⁵¹⁴ Unlike the overly artificial attire he wore for his *Interview* photo shoot, his clothes represented his

⁵¹³ Dan Piepenbring, "Tao Lin on *Bed*," *The Paris Review*, August 18, 2015, accessed May 5, 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/08/18/tao-lin-on-bed/>. The series has feature other notable contemporary authors such as Jeffrey Eugenides, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Christine Schutt, Donald Antrim, and Ben Lerner.

⁵¹⁴ See figure 15, screen shot of Tao Lin from "Tao Lin's First Time," YouTube video, 6:20, posted by The Paris Review, August 18, 2015, <https://youtu.be/Y61g-hTT0N4>.

“normal” appearance, albeit more professional. However, his clothes are not fashion items; they seem to be well-worn. Instead of the heavy consumerism present in the *Interview* photograph, Lin’s appearance in this video uses his attire as a representation of his role as an author, not a fashion model.



Fig. 15: Screen shot of “Tao Lin’s First Time,” YouTube video, 6:20, posted by The Paris Review, August 18, 2015, <https://youtu.be/Y61g-hTT0N4>.

Lin contextualized his early characterizations as an attention-seeking gimmick in the video. He attributed his actions to his naïveté about the literary world and described how his encounters became a way to position himself against the literary marketplace:

During this period of my first few books I was just encountering the media, and my intuition of how to deal with the media apparently was to like just play with it. ... There seemed to be a lot of people who didn’t like my, how I was on the internet, like viewing me as very self-promoting and everything. And I thought all this through and I was just confident like this was fine, this was how a person who has thought things through would want to deal with the media.⁵¹⁵

A couple questions arise about Lin’s visual and textual appearances from his claim to have been “play[ing] with” the media. Were his awkward appearances, such as his *Cooking the Books* interview, a conscious act to maintain a prevailing image? Could Lin’s move from the

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

independent publisher Melville House to the mainstream publisher Vintage Contemporaries have affected how he performed his authorial identity this much? *The Paris Review* video presents a different Lin from his earlier visual presences, and it is highly possible that he has altered his performance to be taken seriously and that this is the true Tao Lin. By admitting how he trollishly approached the media early on, he sheds light on why he appeared as he did. This admission and Lin's recasting of himself as a serious author reveals that many of his early representations were conscious performances simply conducted to push back on the literary establishment.

His audio/visual performances show a progression of his authorial identity from a DIY, digital eccentric to a serious author in only a short time. These media provide Lin with even more platforms to enact his authorship. Combined with his online presences, his audio/visual performances depict an author deeply concerned with his representation, whether it is as a ubiquitous online troll, Romantic, or professional. The shift that occurs across Lin's audio/visual performances allows him to recast his authorial identity to gain a better place in the literary world.

Print becomes the final component in Lin's performance, and it provides the most significant representations of his movement from digital eccentric to serious author. His print performances show him becoming more involved in the discussions around the state of literature. While presenting himself in this manner, he maintains the playfulness depicted in his other media presences. Other mediators participate in Lin's performances in print by highlighting how he has used his literary works to critique contemporary millennial society, but they also drive home the controversial nature of his authorship by continually drawing attention to his digital eccentricities. Although the dual nature of Lin's authorial identity emerges as well, it is

ultimately his engagement with and critiques of literary culture that crystallize his position as a serious author.

The Tao of Print

Print provides Lin the opportunity to engage in more traditional authorial performances. Because print is considered the de facto medium of authorship, he must commit to writing and appearing in it to gain legitimacy. His ability to create and perform his authorial identity in online and audio/visual media set him outside traditional authorship early in his career, but his print performances participate in the historical conversations around literature and authorship. Alongside his nonfiction, other mediators assist in the construction of his authorial identity and its representation. The appearances he makes in print serve as representations of his need to push against the literary establishment, but they also reveal a writer highly concerned with his role as an author.

Lin engaged with the value system in the literary world to highlight its hypocrisy. Similar to his comments about Chabon on his blog, his “The Levels of Greatness a Fiction Writer Can Achieve in America” listed seven satiric categories of authorship. Lin called the lowest category “Centipede in the Darkness,” defining this type of writer as prolific but also “[i]gnored by all print, for-profit media except in foreign countries.”⁵¹⁶ Noah Cicero served as his example, but the description could be applied to Lin too. According to him, this type of writer was new media savvy and better known online than in print. The most traditional trait of this writer was

⁵¹⁶ Lin, “The Levels of Greatness a Fiction Writer Can Achieve in America,” *The Stranger*, November 29, 2007, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/the-levels-of-greatness-a-fiction-writer-can-achieve-in-america/Content?oid=449302>.

posthumous recognition. He claimed this type of writer “[w]ill be rediscovered 60 years after his death,” and that his “[b]log will be published as a hardcover in 2270 on Mars.”⁵¹⁷ For Lin, this type toils in obscurity, creating texts that are not understood or respected by contemporary society, but death brings value to them.

The list progressed from this lowest type to the pinnacle of U.S. authorship. The last four revealed the hypocrisy within literary culture: “Pony On A Pony Farm, Of A Child Of A Billionaire,” “Used Honda Civic in ‘Great’ Condition,” “F-14 Fighter Plane Shooting Missiles At Cacti In Nevada,” and finally “F-16 Fighter Plane Shooting Missiles At A Hut in Iraq While Someone Inside Is Sitting In A Hole And Trying To Read A Copy of ‘Portnoy’s Complaint’ That Was Airdropped By Accident 10 Years Ago In Afghanistan.”⁵¹⁸ These satirical categories poked fun at literary value. “Pony On A Pony Farm” provided evidence of Lin’s respect for writers like Joy Williams, Ann Beattie, and Frederick Barthelme. According to him, these writers were “[c]onsidered ‘important’ and ‘serious,’” but they were not given higher status because of “an inability to make grand pronouncements using sociological, political, or psychological terms,” which is a highly misguided judgment because these writers focus on individual reactions to systemic issues. These writers were beholden to teaching at universities, “Billionaires,” to support their art, and it was this factor that relegated them to lower levels of prestige.

The final three categories consisted of Postmodernists. “Used Honda Civics” were Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, and Rick Moody. These writers were depicted as “‘Great American Novelists,’” but their forays into nonfiction and their media images detracted

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

from their “serious[ness].”⁵¹⁹ The high postmodern authors, DeLillo and Pynchon, were “F-14[’s],” and their reclusivity and focus on large socio-political novels granted them large amounts of cultural prestige. Philip Roth was the only writer occupying Lin’s last type, “F-16,” and he described Roth as having both cultural and commercial success, while at the same time withdrawing from new media and academic culture.

These last three categories are male dominated. Lin stated in his description of “F-14[’s]” that “[r]arely do women attain this level of greatness,” but it was evident that his critique attempted to show the devaluing of female authorship.⁵²⁰ The middle two types represent his influences, mostly female authors, and the biased perceptions of their art. By making female authors lesser in this hierarchy, Lin shows the hypocrisy within the literary world toward male authorship.

Lin trolls prevailing representations of authorship in print, thus connecting his media presences. In “Great American Novelist,” from *The Stranger*, Lin profiled himself, parodying the style of Lev Grossman. He showed the artificial piousness bestowed upon many cultural figures with this piece. During the self-profile, he described how he wanted to be considered a “‘human’” as opposed to “a ‘novelist’ or a ‘serious novelist’ or a ‘great American novelist.’”⁵²¹

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Ibid. Although he critiqued female authors’ inability to be considered as culturally prestigious as Pynchon and DeLillo, Lin failed to mention a literary figure with tremendous cultural capital such as Toni Morrison. Lin’s language implied that Morrison could be grouped under this type, but not providing a concrete example of female authors who were on par with or superior to Pynchon and DeLillo detracted from Lin’s Romantic Feminist approach to cultural categories and the value he placed on lesser types of authorship.

⁵²¹ Lin, “Great American Novelist,” *The Stranger*, September 23, 2010, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/great-american-novelist/Content?oid=4940853>.

His choice to be an author, then, does not replace his identity as a person; it is only an identifier that differentiates and privileges.

Parody and satire do not only serve as ways for Lin to critique prevailing types of authorship in print, but they are also ways for others to privilege Lin as a significant figure. Journalist and book critic Christian Lorentzen adopted Lin's writing style in his *Observer* profile "Tao Lin Will Have the Scallops." Lorentzen's parody validated Lin's aesthetics and authorial identity.⁵²² However, Lorentzen did not merely parody Tao Lin; he proposed a significant claim about Lin's authorship. At the end of the profile, Lorentzen paraphrased Lin's descriptions of "[h]is Concrete/Literal Style," "[h]is Lorrie Moore style," and "[h]is Style for Essays." A few paragraphs down, Lorentzen asked Lin about "free indirect-discourse" in novels, and Lin admitted to not having a good understanding of it. Lorentzen's reply reinforced the image around Lin as a creator and literary experimenter: "*The Observer* said, 'Your Concrete/Literal Style rolls back all the advances Flaubert made in the representation of consciousness. But by rolling back modernity, you've also advanced the novel by exposing its distortions.'"⁵²³ This is the most significant aspect of the profile. While critiquing Lin's style, Lorentzen romanticizes it; it is at once a return to the past and a look toward the future. It is also striking that Lorentzen places Lin in opposition too but in similar company with Flaubert. He stretches here, but it is not unwarranted. Lin's style shows a great care for language and how it represents thought, and it is this aspect of Lin's authorial identity that Lorentzen attempts to "legitim[ize]."⁵²⁴ Lorentzen's parody romanticizes Lin's authorial performance making him appear as a misunderstood artist.

⁵²² Christian Lorentzen, "Tao Lin Will Have the Scallops," *Observer*, August 18, 2010, accessed May 22, 2017, <http://observer.com/2010/08/tao-lin-will-have-the-scallops/>.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

However, Lin pushed back on Romantic authorship and its effects on authors' images. Lin told Ditrapano that he "never got" Romanticism's ideas on divine inspiration.⁵²⁵ He contended that the concept seemed so hard to understand because he did not work or think in that manner. In a similar fashion, he claimed that posthumous recognition was another Romantic hallmark he did not comprehend. Ditrapano asked Lin about his thoughts on "immortality" and how art could act as a means to achieve it. Lin responded, "Yeah, that doesn't make sense to me. Especially with literary writers who are supposed to be thinking...and usually don't believe in God or an afterlife." Although he contended that this idea seemed like a contradiction, Lin did not disavow thinking about immortality. He described how his version of immortality involved the Internet and a science fiction view that in the future "humans will be able to upload all of themselves into the internet, or something like that," not "whether someone in 5000 years will read my books."⁵²⁶ It is difficult to tell if Lin is trolling his audience once again, especially since this interview appears in *Vice*, but it is clear that technology plays a significant role in his views of authorship and engagements with society. Lin's idea that immortality could possibly be achieved through merging with technology is something he has claimed in other publications, and it is this view that contradicts his inability to grasp a traditional Romantic construction of immortality through art. Although he denies art and literature space to become objects of immortality, Lin values communication technology as a way, albeit science fiction, for authors, artists, and people in general to achieve immortality.

Regardless of these views, print functions as a way for Lin to temper his image and become a prominent author. Moving away from the over-performed eccentricities he maintained

⁵²⁵ Ditrapano.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

in underground print publications, he embraced a more mainstream audience to promote *Taipei*. This audience still received depictions of his authorial identity as a DIY-eccentric, but his appearances shifted these representations toward a less abrasive, more traditional enactment of authorship. This perplexed some media figures because it seemed unwarranted and a publishing ploy. Writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Stan Persky found Lin's rise to mainstream attention suspect. Persky stated, "The rapidity and range of attention he and his book got is remarkable: Within a week of publication, *Taipei* had been reviewed or 'noticed' in a dozen places, from *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Esquire* to countless hip little websites."⁵²⁷ This attention, ironically, legitimized Lin's authorial performance.

This newfound legitimacy was based upon him being an heir to literary tradition. Dwight Garner, in his review of *Taipei* for *The New York Times*, compares Lin's writing and authorship to "early Hemingway," Bret Easton Ellis, and Ann Beattie.⁵²⁸ The back cover of *Taipei* featured blurbs that make Lin appear as an essential, groundbreaking author. *Publisher's Weekly* claimed, "Everything about *Taipei* appears to run contrary to the standard idea of what constitutes art," while Frederick Barthelme contends, "Lin is a 21st-century literary adventurer." The blurbs reinforced the image of Lin as a cultural boundary pusher that deserves respect in the literary world.

⁵²⁷ Stan Persky, "Why Did Alt Lit Cross the Road?," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 18, 2013, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/why-did-alt-lit-cross-the-road/>.

⁵²⁸ Dwight Garner, "A Literary Mind, Under the Spell of Drugs and a MacBook," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2013, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/books/taipei-by-tao-lin.html>. See also Benjamin Lytal, "Gchat Is a Noble Pursuit: Tao Lin's Modernist Masterpiece," *Observer*, June 4, 2013. See also Stan Persky, "Why Did Alt Lit Cross the Road?," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 18, 2013.

The most prominent blurb was by Bret Easton Ellis. Ellis's blurb was an edited version of a tweet he posted on March 4, 2013. On *Taipei*, it read, "With 'Taipei' Tao Lin becomes the most interesting prose stylist of his generation." The strategic editing of Ellis's tweet showed Vintage Contemporaries' care in presenting Lin as a significant author endorsed by one of contemporary literature's big names. The latter portion of Ellis's tweet read, "which doesn't mean that 'Taipei' isn't a boring novel."⁵²⁹ Ellis's biting tweet reinforced how Lin was seen by many in the literary world. The main conflict Lin had with Ellis's tweet, its use on *Taipei*, and its continued discussion was how Ellis was "gonna feel" about "the extra promotion."⁵³⁰ His concern stemmed from his deep aversion to the literary marketplace, and he equated Ellis with the commodification of authors. This clashes with Lin's performances of the author as digital eccentric.

However, some publications found a deep connection between Lin and Ellis as authors. Sansom associated Lin with "Jean-Michel Basquiat, Edie Sedgwich, Slavoj Žižek, and Bret Easton Ellis...— people for whom the artwork is not so much an aesthetic achievement as an overflow or outpouring."⁵³¹ These cultural figures enact their identities as part of their art, becoming closely associated with the Romantic idea of needing to express oneself no matter the quality. Like Ellis, Lin populates his novels with drug using characters that are sad and despondent. In *Granta*, Yuka Igarashi contended Lin and his works were "part of a lineage of

⁵²⁹ Bret Easton Ellis, @BretEastonEllis, Twitter post, March 4, 2013, 1:00 am, <https://twitter.com/breastonellis/status/308502148226883584?lang=en>.

⁵³⁰ "BooKalicious Interview #1: Tao Lin 'Tai Pei,'" YouTube video, 7:52, posted by Tara Lennart, March 23, 2014, https://youtu.be/BsSLUYD0G_w.

⁵³¹ Sansom.

authors that write about hedonism.”⁵³² No matter his stance on the comparisons between Bret Easton Ellis and him, it is clear that Lin’s authorial identity is linked to Ellis and other authors who are associated with drug and celebrity culture.

Lin’s authorial performances in print tone down his eccentricities, making him appear as a more serious author. This comes from Lin’s knowledge that print remains the key to literary recognition. Although he critiques mainstream literary culture, Lin displays a deep concern with how authors are represented in print, and his engagement with this topic shows he seeks to associate his authorial performances with literary culture’s veneration of Romantic authorship, while at the same time criticizing its strong influence. By doing this and having his authorship validated by prestigious entities, Lin moves away from his principle representation as a digital provocateur.

The Tao of Tao



Fig. 16: Screen shot of animated Lin, Isabella Cotier, illustrator, Connor Gilhooly, videographer, and Gemm Yin Taylor, video editor, from Christian Lorentzen’s “Tao Lin Talks to Christian Lorentzen,” *Tank*, no. 59 (September 12, 2013), accessed May 5, 2017, <http://tankmagazine.com/issue-59/talk/tao-lin-talks-to-christian-lorentzen/>.

⁵³² Yuka Igarashi, “Tao Lin | Interview,” *Granta*, no. 124 (August 23, 2013), accessed May 5, 2017, <https://granta.com/interview-tao-lin/>.

The digital sketch at the beginning of this conclusion aptly depicts Tao Lin's role in literary culture and his performance of authorial identity. The image adds to the aura that has emerged around him over the course of his career and mirrors his stripped down and "detached" style of writing.⁵³³ It also serves as a reminder that Tao Lin is an emerging figure. Even though he has numerous publications since coming onto the scene in 2006, he has not fully perfected his authorial identity. Lin's early representation as a digital eccentric, spamming his way to recognition, has stuck with him, but through his persistent output and consistent performances across multiple media channels, he has been able to create a level of professionalism around his "brand."

Lin represents a new version of authorship. Gaining attention through online presences before gaining attention through print breaks with tradition, and many cultural figures find this non-traditional path off-putting. According to Katlin Phillips of *The Eye: The Magazine of the Columbia Spectator*, Lin is not "the classical model of a writer," and thus his early rejection by traditional print culture reinforces his difference. She contends, "In other words, he will never be recognized, lauded, or understood by middle-aged men working Las Vegas 'desk weddings.'"⁵³⁴ This conflict between the literary establishment and Lin's performances leads to how he is viewed only as a joke.

Tao Lin performs authorship as more than just the physical representation of an author. He creates a consistent character across multiple media. The Tao Lin performed across online,

⁵³³ Nonko. In this portion of the interview, Lin describes how *SFAA* and *Richard Yates* will be written.

⁵³⁴ Kaitlin Phillips, "The Education of Tao Lin," *The Eye: The Magazine of the Columbia Spectator* 11, no. 2 (September 22, 2011): 11. Phillips referenced the wedding scene from *Mumblecore* when Lin and Boyle recorded the officiant signing their marriage license with their MacBook.

audio/visual, and print media is a piece of performance art. Through these media, Lin enacts his authorial identity to produce a narrative around the character Tao Lin. By establishing a consistent presentation across media, he becomes a property for people to follow, desire, and consume. Romantic authorship, postmodern irony and parody, and the embrace of digital media as a form of self-promotion shape his character. These varied media presences grant him space to perform and revise his authorial identity through the assistance of other mediators. All of these components establish his authorial identity in the literary world. He represents a new form of author in the digital age, one created from traditional components. The desire to push against the literary marketplace through a DIY-mentality highlights one of the ways he incorporates Romanticism into the character of Tao Lin. Along with this, Lin's adoption of new media thus becomes a way to challenge tradition, making him appear revolutionary when in fact he is only an updated version of Romantic authorship.

Chapter 4

The Author as Intersectional: Roxane Gay

“You cannot swing a dead cat, ladies and gentlemen, in the Indie-Lit world online without running into her. Her presence can be felt everywhere.”

—Brad Listi, “Episode 34—Roxane Gay,” *OtherPPL* podcast, January 11, 2012.

“Being a writer makes me feel like I can change the world in some small way or create a whole new world to be a part of.”

—Roxane Gay, comment to a reader, Tumblr, June 27, 2013,
roxanegay.tumblr.com/page/61.

“...you can’t bring your weak shit to me.”

—Roxane Gay, “Interview with a Bad Feminist,” interviewed by Jessie Askinazi, *Bust*, August 20, 2014.

Historically, women authors have held lesser positions within the literary world.

Nathaniel Hawthorne famously claimed in 1855, “...America is now wholly given over to a d—
—d [damned] mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash.”⁵³⁵ Hawthorne’s biting criticism of the feminization of America’s literary market presented not only the feeling of many male writers, but also it represented the dominant sexism within cultural production. The struggle for women to gain a foothold during that time was drastically harder than men. Many of the institutions in the literary world excluded women, and although they have gained recognition since the nineteenth-century, sentiments like Hawthorne’s are still prevalent. Franzen, a focal point for arguments against the

⁵³⁵ Hawthorne to William D. Ticknor, January 19, 1855, in *Letters of Hawthorne to William D. Ticknor, 1851-1864*, vol. 1 (New Jersey: The Carteret Book Club, 1910): 75, *Google Books*.

great white male author tradition, engaged in a small dust-up with genre writer Jennifer Weiner regarding her comments about his numerous reviews in prestigious publications. Franzen told Susan Lerner that he believed Weiner was “freeloading on the legitimate problem of gender bias in the cannon” because she wanted attention for her “formulaic fiction.”⁵³⁶ Similar to Hawthorne, Franzen views Weiner’s fiction as generic, something not on the same level as the novels and essays he writes. For many males in literary culture, women writers produce emotional works that play on the stereotypical perceptions of femininity and shy away from the larger, stereotypically masculine, issues facing humanity, something Tao Lin rightfully criticizes because these works are more representative of the social climate than high Postmodernist literature.

Similar to other cultural spaces, the literary world reflects the world at large. Race and sexuality intersect with gender to further problematize women’s struggles for recognition. People of color and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender writers have also gained a small place within literary culture. These writers’ identities intersect with traditions to create counterpoints to the still prevalent straight white male author image. Many of them embrace digital technology, further disrupting traditional authorship. Othered authors’ identities converge seamlessly from print to audio/video to digital media, making their authorship performative acts, political statements on what it is like to live as minorities.

Roxane Gay is a serious author whose identity moves within the intersections of these socially constructed restrictions. She has obtained a level of recognition many writers desire and

⁵³⁶ Jonathan Franzen, “A Conversation with Jonathan Franzen,” interviewed by Susan Lerner, *Booth: A Journal*, February 13, 2015, <http://booth.butler.edu/2015/02/13/a-conversation-with-jonathan-franzen/>.

doing so despite the limitations placed upon writers of difference.⁵³⁷ Her status as a literary celebrity has not affected how she performs her authorial identity. She strives “to stay humble” and concentrate on producing the best writing that she can without concern for others’ opinions. Since her emergence onto the literary scene with short stories published in small literary magazines to her recurring appearances as an op-ed writer for *The New York Times*, Gay represents how one can achieve a place within literary culture despite one’s differences from the mainstream. At the same time, she participates in authorial myth-making by recounting over the course of her career her “love” for writing from an early age.⁵³⁸ She romanticizes her authorship by claiming she “was going to write one way or another” because the desire had “always been there.”⁵³⁹ She highlights in her performances how she was always, already an author before she gained attention. Through romanticizing her development as an author, Gay bridges the gap between her identity as an author of difference and the traditional ways authorship is depicted as a “calling” in American society.

Gay established herself as a staunch “bad” feminist and proponent of diversity early in her career. Her online presences commented on gender and racial inequality in literary culture,

⁵³⁷ Gay discussed how all authors share the trait of desire in “The Anger of the Male Novelist” in *Salon*, January 20, 2012.

⁵³⁸ Kreyolicious, “An Interview with Author, Writer and Essayist Roxane Gay,” *Kreyolicious*, n.d., accessed September 12, 2017, <http://kreyolicious.com/interview-author-writer-essayist-roxane-gay/14697>. In this interview, Gay described how she began writing stories and drawing illustrations at age four and how her parents bought her a typewriter. Gay made a similar comment in Dorteia Lasky’s “People in My Imagination: Five Questions and Five Answers with Roxane Gay,” published in *Los Angeles Review of Books* on January 2, 2016. Gay told Lasky her favorite toy as a child was her typewriter.

⁵³⁹ Tina Essmaker, “Roxane Gay,” *The Great Disconnect*, June 3, 2014, accessed August 29, 2017, <http://thegreatdiscontent.com/interview/roxane-gay>.

even addressing the beef between Franzen and Weiner in 2012.⁵⁴⁰ Her debut book *Ayiti* (Artistically Declined Press, 2011) experimented with “multiple genres, some of which defy categorization.”⁵⁴¹ The collection allowed her to present herself as an author unafraid of the antiquated views toward literature produced by writers of difference. However, it was her nonfiction that garnered her the most attention. These works have become bestsellers and brought closer attention to how the cultural world deals with race, gender, sexuality, rape, entertainment, obesity, and many issues. Writing in *The Village Voice*, Jonathan Durbin described how Gay was an icon comparable to other celebrities: “By now, the release of a new book by Roxane Gay has become a cultural event. The *New York Times* bestselling author is a rare mainstream crossover, both incisive and remarkably prolific, producing boundary-pushing work across a range of genres.”⁵⁴² *The Root*, in their annual list of influential African-Americans, placed her at number seven in 2017, ahead of more visible celebrities like Beyoncé. The editors described how Gay’s “storytelling is not frilly or tedious but direct in a way that has made her a sensation to the point of rock star status.”⁵⁴³ The unapologetic aspects of her persona and work provides relief from the candy-coated nature of much entertainment, and for many media figures, as well as adoring fans, Gay represents a contemporary authorial voice that helps us confront social difficulties in the United States.

⁵⁴⁰ See Gay, “The Anger of the Male Novelist,” *Salon*, January 20, 2012, accessed August 29, 2017, http://www.salon.com/2012/01/20/the_anger_of_the_male_novelist/.

⁵⁴¹ jatyler, “+ interview /// *Ayiti* by Roxane Gay,” *Monkeybicycle*, October 5, 2011, accessed August 30, 2017, <http://monkeybicycle.net/blog/interview-ayiti-by-roxane-gay/>.

⁵⁴² Jonathan Durbin, “Roxane Gay Is the Hardest-Working Woman in Letters,” *The Village Voice*, June 13, 2017, accessed September 28, 2017, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/06/13/roxane-gay-is-the-hardest-working-woman-in-letters/>.

⁵⁴³ “The Root 100 2017,” *The Root*, n.d., accessed September 28, 2017, <http://interactives.theroot.com/root-100-2017/#roxane-gay>.

Her role as a respected public intellectual and serious author provides her a platform to perform her authorship in hopes of creating discourse around equality. Her reach extends beyond the gender, racial, and technological boundaries at work within the U.S. Culturally prestigious publications such as *Time* have claimed her to be “the gift that keeps on giving” because her commentary has few limits because it can move seamlessly from deep engagement with race, gender, and sexuality to her love of *The Fast and The Furious* franchise.⁵⁴⁴ The range at which she engages culture is one of the most prominent features of her authorial identity that has allowed her to become a well-respected voice across all media channels.

However, Gay’s renown has not destroyed the underlying tensions toward writers of difference. Online trolls flood her digital presences with hate filled comments on her body, gender, and race. She admitted in an interview with the podcast *OtherPPL* that she had developed a fear when appearing in public. She told Brad Listi that the hate she encountered online had encroached upon her job as a professor at Purdue University and that she “wonder[ed] if someone’s gonna shoot” her at a public appearance.⁵⁴⁵ Although she experiences highly negative reactions from a small group, Gay pushes forward, engaging the trolls to “bring visibility to the realities that writers, and especially women writers and people of color who write face.”⁵⁴⁶ Not shying away from the entrenched stereotypes and hateful rhetoric allows her to

⁵⁴⁴ Nolan Feeney, “Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist* is a ‘Manual on How to Be a Human,’” *Time*, August 5, 2014, accessed August 29, 2017, <http://time.com/3082038/roxane-gay-interview-bad-feminist/>. This same quote appears as a blurb on *Bad Feminist* (2014) attributed to *Time*, not Feeney. See also Nolan Feeney, “REVIEW: Roxane Gay’s Riveting Debut Novel *An Untamed State*,” *Time*, May 7, 2014, accessed September 13, 2017, <http://time.com/90402/roxane-gay-an-untamed-state-review/>. Feeney declared “this to be the year of Roxane Gay” because of her dual book publications and increasing literary celebrity.

⁵⁴⁵ Brad Listi, “Episode 448—Roxane Gay,” *OtherPPL* podcast, 1:17:49, January 11, 2017, <http://otherppl.com/roxane-gay-interview-2/>.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

become a strong figure in the continuous battle against inequality. Language, literature, and the Internet become her weapons to combat the historical restrictions directed toward Othered authors.

Like fellow writers who come from the Indie-Lit scene, such as Tao Lin, Gay uses digital media to construct her authorial identity. Her blogging, tweeting, and writing for online publications allowed her to generate a body of work well before she gained validation in print. This use of digital media distances her from the traditional channels of authorship navigated by the great white male authors like Franzen and Wallace.⁵⁴⁷ According to Gay, “Social media and online platforms have empowered the voices that were, for far too long, overlooked by so-called ‘mainstream’ feminism” and mainstream culture.⁵⁴⁸ A hint of digital utopianism existed in this statement, but Gay conceded that the Internet had not been the great equalizer many thought: “Social networking does not offer a universal panacea, but it is something far more significant than ‘constant self-promotion.’”⁵⁴⁹ As with other digitally born authors, she values the Internet’s ability to provide writers with new ways to reach audiences, and through these means, writers traditionally shunned by the literary establishment gain a following for their art and cultural criticism. New media platforms like Tumblr and Twitter, as well as e-zines, grant her the opportunity to publish outside of traditional print media, and it is through this ability to disseminate her work that her authorial identity takes shape. However, her embrace of digital

⁵⁴⁷ Gay addressed Franzen’s views on Twitter and online media directly. See “Franzen Doesn’t Get Twitter” in *Salon*, March 7, 2012 and “What Twitter Does” in *STET: A Writer’s Journal on Culture & Technology*, November 7, 2013.

⁵⁴⁸ Gay, “Where Twitter and Feminism Meet,” *The Nation*, April 17, 2014, accessed September 11, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/where-twitter-and-feminism-meet/>.

⁵⁴⁹ Gay, “What Twitter Does,” *STET: A Writer’s Journal on Culture & Technology*, November 7, 2013, accessed September 25, 2017, <http://stet.editorially.com/articles/what-twitter-does/>.

media does not give her full access to the literary world. Only with the publication and subsequent successes of her print books does she accumulate cultural capital as a serious author.

Throughout this chapter, Gay's performances across multiple media will bring to light how she and other media figures work to construct her identity as an intersectional author. I take a closer look at how she acts beginning with her digital presences during her early career and up through some of her more recent online appearances. For Gay, digital media become a place of community, while at the same time replicating the inequalities present in literary culture, using her digital presences to confront social restrictions. Through these digital appearances, she gains wider attention, but publishing in print solidifies her role. The critical acclaim of Gay's novel *An Untamed State* (Black Cat, 2014) and the tremendous success of her essay collection *Bad Feminist* (Harper Perennial, 2014) propelled her into literary celebrity, moving her out from the confines of independent literature and online notoriety and into the realm of serious literature. The literary celebrity she obtains marks a significant shift in how she must perform. This newfound attention forces Gay to play the role of public intellectual across all media channels. Her literary celebrity intersects with her gender and race, making her a central figure for the continued fight for equality in literary culture, using her presences in new media, audio/visual media, and print media to perform a contemporary version of the feminist author. Through these performances, Gay incorporates traditions of authorship, while forging new interpretations of what it means to be a Black woman author.

Digitizing the Intersections

Like other writers who begin their careers during the late-2000s, Gay is a digitally born author. She embraces the Internet and the possibilities it provides to cultivate an authorial

identity and body of work outside the traditional channels of literary culture. Similar to Tao Lin and other Indie-Lit authors, she finds tremendous value in Twitter. Her early tweets represent the merging of her many identities, and to the current day, it operates as a real-time text that displays the nuances of her performance of the author as intersectional.

Gay posted her first tweet on June 20, 2007. It read, “In my office grading and converting student presentations from .dv to .mov.”⁵⁵⁰ The tweet reads as a typical first tweet by a “regular” individual, not someone who will become a literary celebrity, and Gay’s identity at this time was as a graduate student pursuing her PhD in Rhetoric and Technical Communication, not a bestselling author. The absence of an authorial identity was further emphasized by her eight-month span between her first and second tweets. Her second one highlighted her eventual adoption of the platform as a performance tool. On March 25, 2008, Gay tweeted, “Finally, I am ready to drink the Twitter Kool-Aid. Do not want to grade.”⁵⁵¹ From this tweet/date forward, she appeared on Twitter regularly, tweeting multiple times a day on a range of subjects. The platform became a means to establish herself as an author. Gay posted on September 4, 2008, “Today is one of those days when I feel like my writing career is in the biggest goddamned slump. I’m not even getting calls for submissions.”⁵⁵² The first mention of her identity as an author reflected a theme that appeared consistently during the development of her persona: the struggles of emerging authors against the literary marketplace.

⁵⁵⁰ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, June 20, 2007, 2:46 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/113423762>.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., Twitter, March 25, 2008, 9:39 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/777108123>.

⁵⁵² Ibid., Twitter, September 4, 2008, 3:17 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/909772781>.

Twitter and other digital only publications like *HTMLGiant* and *The Rumpus* provided Gay with ways to circumvent the traditional avenues of publication. Tweeting afforded her the chance to criticize how the publishing industry valued authors and comment on the effects this had on the writer's sense of worth. Her strength and resolve against tradition becomes evident with her desire to be seen as a credible member of the literary world. She tweeted on February 24, 2010 a quote from a rejection letter and her inspirational retort: "'I hope your morale will survive this bad news.' MOFO, please. I'm a writer. I live for rejection."⁵⁵³ By writing this, she assumes the role of the author, and this includes negotiating the literary marketplace and its representatives. She showed strength in the face of rejection through her colloquial language, implying that her authorial identity was built upon the pain of not being accepted for one's worth. Slang and vulgarity mark her language throughout her media performances. Adopting this type of speech against refined literary language allows Gay to represent herself as an outsider, but also as an author attempting to disrupt literary decorum.

However, her strength and resolve took a toll on her confidence, and her online presences worked through these effects. On *HTMLGiant*, where she was a regular contributor until 20014, Gay pondered the meaning of genius and its recognition by the MacArthur Foundation in the essay "On Genius." She wrote, "The idea of genius is really interesting to me and it's something I feel I'm always trying to reach for, despite my limitations."⁵⁵⁴ She emphasized subtly the historical restrictions within literary culture, here, and she undervalued her abilities as a writer because she had been conditioned to interpret writing by people of difference as outside of the

⁵⁵³ Ibid., Twitter, February 24, 2010, 9:49 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/9606771733>.

⁵⁵⁴ Roxane Gay, "On Genius," *HTMLGiant*, September 28, 2010, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/random/on-genius/>.

mainstream. As Feminist critic Nancy K. Miller contends, women's Otherness in Western culture leads to "structurally important differences from that universal position" of white male identity.⁵⁵⁵ The standards around genius are still, no matter the steps that have been made toward inclusivity, based in patriarchal, Romantic conceptions of authorship. Gay's identities as Black and as a woman affected how she compared herself to the canon of literary "geniuses." She admitted, "As writers, some of us are always striving for genius or to write something ingenious."⁵⁵⁶ It is important to note how Gay uses language to perform her authorial identity here. Her language masked her performance in a general statement, playing upon the accepted historical configurations of art and artists.

Furthermore, she described how she associated "genius with greatness" and how this perception affected her views on authorship. By conflating these characterizations, she expressed her desire to achieve this type of recognition. Her authorial identity sought to break free from the hindrances of race and gender to compose a work that transcended identity to become, as she claimed, "evidence that I am exceptional." Moving beyond these limitations becomes a prominent concern for Gay. The image she constructs through this early performance is one of aspiration, but at the same time it suffers because it does not meet the standards of Romantic genius. Gay must confront her desire to be considered a "great" author in the literary world by refining her identity through writing against the grain.

One issue Gay took on early in the development of her authorial identity was literary culture's stigma toward the digital, placing herself at the intersection of print and new media.

⁵⁵⁵ Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader," in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. Seán Burke (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh), 197.

⁵⁵⁶ Gay, "On Genius."

Even though she aspired to publish traditionally with mainstream presses, she understood that the Internet could generate an audience and attention.⁵⁵⁷ However, she did not understand how her peers did not find this beneficial. On August 18, 2010, Gay tweeted about how writers fetishize print as the predominant literary medium: “I don’t understand why writers are so obsessed with print. 750 ppl will read a print issue. 7500 will read you online in one month.”⁵⁵⁸ The tweet provided a glimpse into her views on literary culture’s misguided traditions, particularly the value of print over digital media. Her tweet stemmed from her role as editor of *Pank*, an online literary journal she founded with M. Bartley Seigal in 2006.⁵⁵⁹ As both a writer and editor, she knew from her experiences the benefits the Internet offered emerging author. This allowed Gay to critique from within the system.

She extended her critique of this stigma in the essay “Once There Was Great Writing Here,” published on *HTMLGiant*. The essay took on the issue of writers pulling their work from online publications in preparation for print editions of their work. She described how, as an editor, she had received requests to remove certain works from the web, something she found extremely troubling and disrespectful. Gay believed the privileging of print over digital publication set “a bad precedent” because it not only devalued new media publication, but it also

⁵⁵⁷ See Roxane Gay, “Toward a More Complete Measure of Excellence,” *The Rumpus*, December 2, 2011, accessed August 28, 2017, <http://therumpus.net/2011/12/toward-a-more-complete-measure-of-excellence/>. In this essay, Gay criticized *The New York Times* Best Books List and how authors from major presses dominate it. Gay contended that this limits our ability to connect with diversity.

⁵⁵⁸ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, August 18, 2010, 1:49 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/21508365746>.

⁵⁵⁹ “About,” *Pank*, n.d., accessed November 29, 2017, <https://pankmagazine.com/about-2/>. *Pank* publishes both print and online versions now.

kept alive the idea that online work was ephemeral.⁵⁶⁰ Even though she admitted to being “a big proponent of electronic and online publishing,” she felt “there is a permanence to a physical book or magazine that cannot be denied.”⁵⁶¹ She acknowledged that print can “disappear” and highlighted the ease at which online writing can “disappear entirely.”⁵⁶² Her concession showed that print has an effect over her own performances of authorship. The value she placed upon digital media lessened through her fetishization of print and the myth of permanence.

At the same time, the digital does not offer the same opportunities of economic and cultural capital as print. Gay understood this at the time and used Twitter to comment on how authors romanticize poverty.⁵⁶³ Although she contended that the myth of the poverty stricken artist needed to be dismissed, she tweeted on November 8, 2010 that “giv[ing] away a lot of writing for free” was something she and “all” authors did regularly because it was what had traditionally been done.⁵⁶⁴ Her position in the online community allowed her to easily publish; however, the place of publication proves her point that “the publishing industry sometimes shoots itself in the face and takes a scenic tour of a graveyard” because the flexibility of digital publications like *HTMLGiant* and, to an extent, Twitter allow for the inclusion of not only many

⁵⁶⁰ Gay, “Once There Was Great Writing Here, *HTMLGiant*, October 1, 2010, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/behind-the-scenes/once-there-was-great-writing-here/>.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Gay (@rgay), “I think some writers need to be reminded that poverty is not noble. Like, you don't get bonus points for brokeassness. Jesus,” Twitter, October 12, 2010, 3:04 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/2716555766>.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., “I give away a lot of writing for free. We all do but I'm reflecting on myself because this is Twitter,” Twitter, November 8, 2010, 10:56 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/1845524583948288>.

different texts but nontraditional voices.⁵⁶⁵ This push for equality in literary culture spurs Gay to develop another primary trait of her authorial identity across digital media.

Her performance of the author as intersectional develops out of her concern with equality in the literary world. The historical view that Othered authors were not as artistic nor culturally important as white male authors and their works represents the conflict Gay meets head on within her performances. In “A Profound Sense of Absence,” she criticized the publishing industry’s lack of racial diversity. Toward the end of the first paragraph, which described her admiration for Richard Russo’s novels and her “expectations” for his guest editorship of *Best American Short Stories 2010*, she stated bluntly, “I know people will disagree with my thoughts here and that’s fine, but I really think shit is fucked up in literary publishing.”⁵⁶⁶ According to Gay, a lack of diversity was present across all cultural fields, and she believed it occurred because of “the inequities that are present in society at large.”⁵⁶⁷ For her, this mirroring of larger socio-cultural inequalities whitewashes the publishing industry. At the same time, others in the publishing industry, and readers in general, including Gay, are held accountable. She admitted to not reading as widely and diversely as she should, and she acknowledged that there were “tokens” that were recognized by the mainstream and have their works read by white audiences, but this was not enough. Gay admonished the literary establishment for consistently validating

⁵⁶⁵ Gay, “Once There Was Great Writing Here.”

⁵⁶⁶ Gay, “A Profound Sense of Absence,” *HTMLGiant*, December 3, 2010, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/random/a-profound-sense-of-absence/>. The use of vulgar colloquial language again demonstrated Gay’s attempts to craft her performances outside of traditional literariness. Digital publication allowed for her to use this type of language because of the niche audience, and the informal aspects embedded within connotations of the medium.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid. See also Gay, “The Anger of the Male Novelist,” *Salon*, January 20, 2012.

the works of white male authors and a select few women and people of color. At the end of the piece, she laid out her reasons for judging writing beyond socially constructed identifiers:

There are many characteristics of great writing. While there's no consensus, I believe great writing can and should transcend things like race and gender and class. Great writing should be writing that is so powerful it elevates us beyond the things that characterize us in our daily lives. And yet, I also believe that writing should tell us things we don't already know and give us insights into the lives of people who are completely different from us or anyone we know. Great writing should challenge us and make us uncomfortable and push our boundaries.⁵⁶⁸

Like earlier in the piece, she asserted that literature was an art beyond the limitations of socially constructed identities. Her lived experiences and her identities reveal how her authorship casts literature as an art form for revealing the many voices present in U.S. society, not just those of a privileged few.

Gay's self-reflexivity caused her to act out her socio-cultural views through her appearances across multiple websites. As her audience grew, her authorial identity traits became more legitimate. Responding to a follower on Twitter on February 23, 2011, she used the opportunity to restate briefly her views on writing media and cultural recognition: "I think writing is writing regardless of the medium. Bloggers have a more visible platform, so they get some of the bigger deals."⁵⁶⁹ This showed Gay considering the media attention that developed around some bloggers and the value placed upon writing within digital and print media. She collapsed the boundaries that had been set up within the literary world to guard against devaluing of print.

Similarly, she performed her authorship as a voice for Others. In "To Write As a Woman Is Political," published on *HTMLGiant* on the same day she tweeted the reply above, Gay

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁹ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, February 23, 2011, 10:25 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/40613138185330688>.

recapitulated the feminist slogan of the personal being political. She discussed how she received a letter from a woman telling her that the story “Strange Gods” had been deeply affecting. This, combined with thoughts about other women readers’ letters of solidarity and current political attempts to “legislate women’s bodies,” spurred Gay to delve more deeply into this issue. She admitted that she and other writers often attempt to avoid acknowledging the political traits of their authorial identities out of fear that their work would be misinterpreted and judged not as art but as commentary on the political climate at the time. She confessed that she suffered from “an inferiority complex,” because she viewed her fiction as “domestic stories,” which in her mind did not carry “the imprimatur of political writing.”⁵⁷⁰ Breaking free from these traditions around what was “I”mportant “L”iterature must occur before the literary world could open itself up to a deeper range of human experiences.

Ultimately, writing allowed her to think through these feelings of inadequacy and see categorizations as “simply a matter of scale.”⁵⁷¹ In the final paragraph, Gay performed a dramatic act, that of declaring her intent to create political art:

For now, though, I guess I would say the female body and its experiences is my war, the war I do know of and the legislative attack on the female body is where I want to start to stand my political ground as a writer. [...] Anytime I write a story about a women’s [sic] experience I am committing a political act. I am trying to say these stories matter, these kinds of people matter, that these stories are as critical and consequential as the kinds of stories more traditionally considered political. I’m a relatively unknown writer. I don’t know how far my voice will ever reach. [...] I do know, however, that my writing reached one girl today and that feels like a good start.⁵⁷²

⁵⁷⁰ Gay, “To Write As a Woman Is Political,” *HTMLGiant*, February 23, 2011, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/random/to-write-as-a-woman-is-political/>.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

Through this performative act, she placed her authorship firmly within the intersection of art and politics. Writing from lived experience shows her commitment from this moment forward to the cause for women and people of color's equality, not only in the literary world but all areas of U.S. society. This type of act serves, according to The Combahee River Collective, as "the most profound and potentially the most radical politics [because it] come[s] directly out of our own identity."⁵⁷³ Gay's declaration at the end of "To Write As a Woman Is Political" becomes an accepted marker of her authorial identity, and her acceptance of the role of intersectional author requires her to engage with the traditions of not only serious authorship but also feminism in America.

Just as she developed a digital intersectional authorial identity, Gay published her first print book *Ayiti* (Artistically Declined Press, 2011). This added another layer to her authorial performance. Not only was she a cultural-critic blogger, Twitter user, and short-story writer, she was a published author who now had to promote a book in the literary marketplace. Although a mainstream press did not publish *Ayiti*, the independent press Artistically Declined Press positioned Gay as a significant emerging author. In an interview on Melville House's blog, Gay was described as a "renaissance woman," which became other mediators' standard depiction of her.⁵⁷⁴ Revealingly, she discussed her interaction with Artistically Declined Press while promoting the book. On being a published author and working with an independent press, Gay admitted that "it's awesome and surreal" because it was not something she expected. She stated she was grateful for the "pretty smooth" experience. This revelation allowed Gay to cast herself

⁵⁷³ The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, 3rd ed., eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2013), 118.

⁵⁷⁴ Abby Koski, "Interview: Roxane Gay," *Melville House*, November 18, 2011, accessed September 26, 2017, <https://www.mhpbooks.com/interview-roxane-gay/>.

as not only a critic but also a concerned member of the literary world. She told Koski, “In terms of publicity we’re pretty low key,” and “I don’t want to be all in your face, ‘OH HEY I HAVE A BOOK.’” Furthermore, the main difference in promoting this book, besides for the standard “interviews and review copies” in Gay’s opinion was that her blog, *I Have Become Accustomed to Rejection*,⁵⁷⁵ provided her an opportunity to spread the news through not only her posts, but also through her followers sharing. Even though she doesn’t actively over-promote online, her statement shows her willingness to participate in the literary marketplace.

Gay’s participation in the literary marketplace did not cloud her criticism regarding how authors were represented. On February 25, 2011, she tweeted, “If you ever hear me use brand with regards to myself as a person, punch me HARD.”⁵⁷⁶ Her eighty-character tweet reveals the conflict all writers experience. As a society obsessed with celebrity and branding, writers are required to have specific identifiers that we can not only find solace in but also market. Gay’s tweet shows the absurdity of associating individuals with products, especially in the literary world.

A brand, however, had begun taking shape around her. In “Where I Write #9: A Cabin on the Lakefront,” published on *The Rumpus* where she served as the first essay editor, Gay romanticized her work space. She discussed how she wrote in the cabin of a former lover while living in Michigan. In the middle of the essay, she claimed, “There is nothing interesting about where I write but I can write anywhere.” She went on to state, “Everything about my writing, for

⁵⁷⁵ This was the title of Gay’s first blog. The blog was active until May 2011 when Gay changed over to Tumblr. The *Internet Archive* lists *I Have Become Accustomed to Rejection* under the web address roxanegay.com. Gay uses that address for her current Tumblr.

⁵⁷⁶ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, February 25, 2011, 2:10 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/41213403917848577>.

better or worse, comes from inside me. I have always been this way.”⁵⁷⁷ The Romantic myth of divine inspiration and the author functioning like a vessel for a higher artistic creator did not seem to apply to her. She viewed herself as the primary creative being through her imagination and lived experiences. Her humility was on full display, and she used it to her advantage in representing her authorship. She did not make a grand declaration that the cabin or nature opened up her imagination, but the language she used emphasized the Romantic trope of author isolation.

Alongside reinforcing this Romantic view of literary creation, Gay presented the conflicts present in her authorial identity. Attempting to break down the traditional image of the author at work, she wrote, “I don’t like writing at a desk. It feels forced, like I’m performing the part of the writer.” This is a striking statement given the fact that she is “performing the part of the writer” whether she works at a desk or not. By distancing herself from this image, Gay showed how *her* authorial identity did not conform to these standards. Even as she cast herself as different, she disrupted her own performance. Directly after she discussed not using a desk, she wrote, “I am always writing in my head. This sometimes makes people think I’m aloof.” Here she participates in the idea of the author being consumed by her or his work and the prevailing representation of Romantic genius.

Gay fleshed out this image in another essay, which dealt with literary culture’s desire to know more about authors’ inspirations. Writing again on *HTMLGiant*, she proposed that dreaming provided her with the ability to compose her works.⁵⁷⁸ This declaration came after she

⁵⁷⁷ Gay, “Where I Write #9: A Cabin on the Lakefront,” *The Rumpus*, May 24, 2011, accessed August 28, 2017, <http://therumpus.net/2011/05/where-i-write-9-a-cabin-on-the-lakefront/>.

⁵⁷⁸ Gay, “My Muse Is Shitty Sleep Dream,” *HTMLGiant*, December 20, 2011, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/random/my-muse-is-shitty-sleep-dreams/>.

poked fun at the fascination with authors' work practices. She stated coyly, "If I have a muse, it is an endless loop of *Law & Order: SVU*."⁵⁷⁹ Popular culture is one of her intellectual interests, but here, she uses her love of the mainstream crime show to deconstruct the muse myth. By claiming she wrote while binge watching, Gay destabilized the traditional trope of writer solitude and divine inspiration. At the same time, she provided insight into her writing process through her "shitty sleep dream" as "a waking dream and I remember all of it."⁵⁸⁰ She revealed that her authorial identity included certain Romantic traits. The emphasis she places upon her dreams and their power outside of sleep becomes a representation of the author as divinely inspired. Ultimately, she downplays this Romantic version of her authorship by claiming it is "more exotic" to have a muse than it is to say, "'I just play pretend.'" Gay's humility forces the reader to view her as an author who is concerned with her representation and establishing a realistic brand.

Appearing in the digital literary magazine *Full Stop* in December 2011, Gay participated in the publication's "update" of *The Partisan Review*'s 1939 author questionnaire. The editors of the magazine described the need for "political questions" toward authors as important in 2011's "year of global unrest."⁵⁸¹ Gay clarified the political intent of her authorship by reinforcing how her works, whether fiction or nonfiction, come from her experiences as a Black woman: "My writing is lots of things but more often than not, the stories and essays I write reflect an allegiance to women and the concerns of women. A lot of my writing is an expression of who I

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ The Editors, "The Situation in American Writing: Roxane Gay," *Full Stop: Reviews. Interviews. Marginalia*, December 9, 2011, accessed August 30, 2017, <http://www.full-stop.net/2011/12/09/features/the-editors/the-situation-in-american-writing-roxane-gay/>.

am. I draw from my experiences heavily and shamelessly and if you read my writing you will know at least something about me.”⁵⁸² Her choice to perform as a political author allowed her to cast herself as a champion for underrepresented voices, and she believed that through the author’s works audiences gained empathy toward minorities’ experiences. She admitted to not distinguishing between minor and grand political acts and that literature should “respond to the world we live in—the good and the bad, upheaval and calm, matters foreign and domestic.”⁵⁸³ She contended that literary culture’s traditional denigration of individual experiences as less important was “narrow.” The image Gay created during this interview continued the prevailing representation she began earlier in 2011. This image that becomes Gay’s brand of authorship that required her consistent maintenance the image in all her media presences.

Tumblr becomes another digital platform for Gay’s performance of intersectional authorship. She deconstructs the boundaries between the author and the audience with her posts, adding intimacy to her performances. Her first post was on May 5, 2011. “Things I am Currently Charmed By” focused on her engagement with popular culture. She claimed her “spirit animal is *One Tree Hill*” and how she was “more a Khloe than a Kim Kardashian or Team Kendra!”⁵⁸⁴ Instead of diving directly into her literary nonfiction regarding equality, something that emerged later on the platform, Gay showed her audience she was grounded in popular culture and thus a relatable figure. In an interview with the now defunct online literary magazine *Nano Fiction*, Gay discussed how she interpreted her blog:

My blogging is a lot of things. It allows me to get most of my crazy out in a manner that is not self-destructive. Blogging [sic] a great way for me to write without thinking and

⁵⁸² Ibid.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁴ Gay (roxanegay), “Things I’m Currently Charmed By,” Tumblr, May 5, 2011, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/5222521080/things-i-am-currently-charmed-by>.

I'm actually starting to cull essays from blog entries because the writing just seems to come to me [...]. I also like talking about rejection because I think more writers should talk about the small failures, the things we go through, the frustration of trying to be great and often told, 'No try harder.' Writing can be lonely and blogging is mostly a way of making things less lonely.⁵⁸⁵

Tumblr becomes a way for her to test ideas and get audience feedback before publishing them as standalone essays. Unlike more traditional, primarily male, literary authors, Gay, similar to Tao Lin, values a social media platform like Tumblr to create a following around her authorial identity.

Gay's new media presences broadened after 2012 to include appearances in more mainstream publications. As a result of the audience she cultivated through her early digital presences and print publications, she constructed a brand around herself; she had become for many a significant cultural figure. The newfound attention did not drastically alter how she performed her authorial identity. In fact, mainstream recognition provided Gay with the broader platform necessary to enact her brand of authorship against the traditions of literary culture.

Over this time span, she refined her attitudes and their online presentation. "The Anger of the Male Novelist" showed her returning to the fight for equality in the publishing industry, except now with the wider audience of *Salon*. She wrote, toward the end of the piece, "Anyone who looks at the media coverage of contemporary writing can easily see that male novelists, even midlist novelists, receive consistent coverage."⁵⁸⁶ She pointed toward one of the more pressing issues at stake for women authors: media attention. Throughout the essay, Gay described how *all* authors, save for Jonathan Franzen and other male literary icons, experienced

⁵⁸⁵ Sophie Rosenblum, "Five Questions with Roxane Gay and Brian Oliu," *Nano Fiction*, May 20, 2011, accessed August 30, 2017, <http://nanofiction.org/weekly-feature/interviews/2011/05/five-questions-with>.

⁵⁸⁶ Gay, "The Anger of the Male Novelist," *Salon*, January 20, 2012, accessed August 29, 2017, http://www.salon.com/2012/01/20/the_anger_of_the_male_novelist/.

the fickleness of contemporary publishing, and she asserted that this was not a sign of “the quality of our writing.”⁵⁸⁷ She was not naïve toward the fact that the literary world was saturated with aspiring authors and that the publishing industry could not and/or would not put all its resources into promoting works they believed would not be commercially successful. The fact that the publishing industry was a business was not lost on her, and she made it clear that many authors would agree with her claims.

Nonetheless, Gay pointed out the similarities between writers. She declared that although authors appeared modest and adverse to the trappings of fame and celebrity, they craved cultural attention. She used Jonathan Franzen’s anointment as “The Great American Novelist” by *Time* and Jeffrey Eugenides’s image on a Time Square billboard as examples of the types of literary celebrity the majority of authors desired.⁵⁸⁸ This admission characterizes her from this point forward. On the one hand, she seeks to work not for herself but for the underrepresented, while on the other, she is not immune to the attractions of literary celebrity. Some would argue that Gay’s statement earlier in the essay about “rarely writing about” her own experiences absolves her of her jealousy toward Franzen and Eugenides, but it is difficult to remove her from the generalizations she makes. By drawing broad conclusions about “[c]ontemporary writers,” Gay leaves room for her inclusion because she is, in fact, a writer who wants to be considered a serious author, no matter how much she distances herself from it. She tweeted earlier in 2012, “If I am ever being a pretentious Writer in public slap me.”⁵⁸⁹ The tweet cast her outside of the images typically associated with prominent authors. In capitalizing “Writer,” however, Gay

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, February 29, 2012, 5:35 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/174986189114327040>.

emphasized the capital-I importance that many authors seek in literary culture. The tweet preceded the *Salon* essay, but the two revealed how her online presences struggled with authorial representation. This struggle provided her with an access point into defining more precisely authors' cultural roles.

Gay's Tumblr provides her a space to work through the conflicts of being an author during the digital age without the stress of mainstream attention. In a reply to a follower's question, she described how suffering for one's art had become a detrimental myth for aspiring authors: "Writing is not supposed to be painful. Writers have perpetuated a bizarre mythology about the angst of writing for far too long. Writing should be fun!"⁵⁹⁰ This echoed her earlier critique from Twitter about artistic suffering and poverty. Her answer showed that the myth of suffering for one's art was false, and this myth had become so ingrained that it obscured how writers approached writing and themselves. Furthermore, she claimed, "Writing is always a pleasure," in the post "Here We Are."⁵⁹¹ She described how she used writing and reading as affective tools and asserted that these two activities needed "to overwhelm" individuals with emotion via language.⁵⁹² Although she admitted to not being fully prepared for the effects the public had upon her writing, Gay acknowledged that receiving news that her work mattered to just one person created joy and purpose. Connection and consolation through digital media are essential for her authorial performances. Through these experiences, she gains further validation of her performance of the author as intersectional.

⁵⁹⁰ Gay (roxanegay), "Hi, Roxane...", Tumblr, September 4, 2012, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/30909983377/hi-roxane-ive-found-myself-at-a-literary>.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., "Here We Are," Tumblr, July 28, 2012, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/28225072261/here-we-are>.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

The dialogue between Gay and her followers on social media becomes a central component of her authorial performances. Like Lin and other contemporary authors who use their Tumblr as places to interact with their audience, Gay links to posts to shed light on her attitudes. In the post “Zing,” she answered a teenager’s question about becoming a writer by linking to the post “How to Be a Contemporary Writer.” This listed twenty-five points she believed were essential for contemporary authors. The first points related to each other: “Read diversely” and “Write.”⁵⁹³ Along the same lines, in “Zing,” she stated writing and reading were synonymous acts. Doing each one habitually improved anyone’s abilities as a writer.⁵⁹⁴ This became her mantra when discussing how to become an author, but they did not fully represent the way she performed.

Instead, Gay provides her audience with a warning about the publishing industry that reinforces her feminist identity. She finds the lack of equality and its effects on writers of difference highly troubling. She uses her social media presences to craft performances that disrupt the restrictions working inside the literary world. Gay made this clear in points five and five-a of “How to Be a Contemporary Writer.” She wrote, “Accept that sometimes literary success is political and/or about who you know and that’s not likely to change.” Explaining but also providing encouragement to women and people of color, Gay asserted that these should not affect their aspirations to write and publish. In fact, she urged them to “[l]earn how to kick the shit out of those barriers” and to not “assume every failure is about your identity because such is

⁵⁹³ Ibid., “How to Be a Contemporary Writer,” Tumblr, August 15, 2012, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/29504832600/how-to-be-a-contemporary-writer>.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., “Zing,” Tumblr, November 27, 2012, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/36668972002/zing>.

not the case.”⁵⁹⁵ The insightful yet tough advice cast Gay as a pragmatist. She knows limitations exist and that they need to be removed in order to create a more diverse literary field, yet as a consequence of these historical effects, minority authors must not fall into a self-loathing trap. She provides a way to push aspiring authors to work on their art and not blame their inabilities on the systemic limitations.

Her pragmatic advice clashed with the Romantic traits she performed in “Zing.” Even though she cast her authorial identity outside of Romantic inspiration by claiming she did not have “some deep spiritual explanation for writing,” the majority of the Tumblr post detailed how Gay became inspired to write.⁵⁹⁶ For her, “the zing” represented uncontrollable inspiration. It consumed her and caused her to “fucking *feel* it.” The feeling she describes mirrors Romantic inspiration. The zing became not only a feeling but also a drug: “The feeling is so exhilarating. I think this is why I don’t do drugs. I get my high from writing.”⁵⁹⁷ The image that appears in this post shows the conflict at play in Gay’s authorial performance. While she attempts to provide real world criticism of literary culture, she professes to fall under the influence of some Romantic force. This conflict stems from the tensions that have plagued American literature historically. In an interview published on *NPR*’s website, Annalisa Quinn claimed, “Gay never obscures her authorial self, never pretends that her writings were birthed immaculately, handed down whole from the mount whence cultural judgments are dispensed.”⁵⁹⁸ Quinn’s description

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., “How to Be a Contemporary Writer.”

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., “Zing.”

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁸ Annalisa Quinn, “Roxane Gay: ‘Bad Feminist,’ Real Person,” *NPR*, July 5, 2014, accessed August 29, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2014/07/03/328228837/roxane-gay-bad-feminist-real-person>.

of Gay two years later contradicted the version Gay promoted in her post and struggled with in other online presences. At the end of “Zing,” Gay called herself “a random writer.” This characterization was steeped in her signature humility, deflecting the authority many readers find in her persona. Nonetheless, this description fell short because the zing became the impetus for writing the post.⁵⁹⁹ She struggled to keep the professional and the Romantic aspects of her authorial identity separate, and this difficulty affected her perceptions of authorship and literary celebrity.

She struggled between recognition as a serious author and participating in the further commodification of authorship. Across her online presences, Gay critiqued the celebrity system that had become a major part of the literary world. At the same time, the mounting attention around her caused a shift in how she acted as an author. Commenting on how writers were perceived as commodities in a Tumblr post from January 3, 2013, she declared, “Great writers are canned goods.”⁶⁰⁰ She summarized her views on literary fads, such as the shift toward more personal writing and how these authors gained wide recognition as cultural authorities. However, Gay expressed that “no writing trend” altered the tradition of literary greatness because she believed that “a matter of time” was all authors needed to gain the rightful respect they deserved.⁶⁰¹ Romanticism radiates from these statements. The idea that “Great writers” are often misunderstood in their own time and will receive their rightful respect from later generations is a

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁰ Gay (roxanegay), “More thoughts on personal writing/journalism/etc.,” Tumblr, January 3, 2013, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/39583844192/more-thoughts-on-personal-writingjournalismetc>.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

hallmark of Romantic authorship. As she constructs an image of professionalism, she cannot escape the lasting effects of Romanticism on her authorial performance.

The issue of performing the cultural role of the author becomes something Gay feels inclined to resist even while participating in commodification processes. In a tweet, she expressed her dismay at how up-and-coming authors felt the need to critique their literary predecessors: “This new trend of writers complaining about famous writers in essay form is very strange as is all the congratulation for so-called honesty.”⁶⁰² Ten minutes after tweeting this, she added, “I get it. I have some extraordinary imaginary rivalries with famous writers. I just wonder about the topic as creative fodder.”⁶⁰³ Her tweets provided a short glimpse into how she viewed literary relationships. In order to create buzz, authors must engage in the tradition of the literary takedown, but Gay finds these to be shortsighted because they do not go beyond personal preference.

In June of 2012, Gay published “Someday Everything Will Matter: Shit Fancy Writers Say” on *HTMLGiant*. The title, once again, used her signature vulgar colloquialisms to place her outside of tradition; she was not a “fancy writer.” The essay addressed how authors have become celebrities, and through this continued turn toward celebrity, their roles and images change. She expressed her bewilderment with Romantic traits authors act out in their public appearances. This was ironic because she allowed similar ones to seep into her performances. She claimed that the literary marketplace was to blame for the shift in how writers approach their authorship: “There’s writing and there’s being a writer and the more success you achieve, the more you have to spend your time being a writer—being interviewed, writing op eds and essays, getting your

⁶⁰² Gay (@rgay), Twitter, August 16, 2012, 2:46 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/236172039952674816>.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., 2:55 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/236174371956338688>.

picture taken, coming up with pithy lists of what you are reading or cooking or how you are spending each hour of the day and maybe, just maybe, writing new books.”⁶⁰⁴ Gay discussed Franzen, David Mitchell, Julian Barnes, Ray Bradbury, Umberto Eco, and *The Paris Review*. Her critique revealed that what the audience gained from the revelations these authors made in their interviews and other public appearances shed no significant light onto their works or their creative processes. Ultimately, she claimed, “It must be exhausting *being a writer*, all that blah blah blah.”⁶⁰⁵ This represents the central conflict of literary culture and its fascination with celebrity. On the one hand, Gay criticizes celebrity culture and the literary marketplace’s push to brand personalities. On the other hand, she feeds into this feature by claiming that these public performances reveal aspects of the literary life to emerging writers.⁶⁰⁶ The public desire for these types of performances clashes with her interpretation of authorship. Performing the role of an author involves embracing not only writing but the marketplace.

Her authorial identity becomes a site for the traditional tensions of American authorship. Couched in a recipe post on Tumblr, Gay criticized the conflict between Romanticized authorial identities and commercialism: “If you have major book deals, an agent, glossy coverage in major publications, you are very much part of the literary world.”⁶⁰⁷ This statement presented another

⁶⁰⁴ Gay, “Someday Everything Will Matter: Shit Fancy Writers Say,” *HTMLGiant*, June 15, 2012, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/web-hype/someday-everything-will-matter-shit-fancy-writers-say/>.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷ Gay (roxanegay), “So I Don’t Fall Out,” Tumblr, August 5, 2013, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/57488770104/so-i-dont-fall-out>. This was not the first instance of Gay inserting cultural criticism within a recipe post. Similar to how many people used social media—particularly Tumblr and Instagram—Gay posted recipes and photographs of food early in her presences on these media. Her Tumblr posts shifted in 2013 to more food posts, but

central issue in serious authorship—the desire to transcend the marketplace. Many authors act as if they are immune to the effects of commercialism. These authors vow that they are artistic, serious artists who find the fixation with celebrity and other commodity forms troubling because they dilute true art. Her brief admonishment of these types of authors revealed that this was false because it took place from a position of privilege, that of mainstream publishing. She asserted that actions affected authorial images because it was through an author's works and other appearances that their value within literary culture emerged.⁶⁰⁸ Gay's language implies she follows these principles, and it is through these principles that literary recognition is achieved.

Furthering her point in a tweet from October 5, 2013, Gay criticized Franzen for his continued attacks on social and digital media as not worthy of the serious author's time and energy: "Hey Franzen. Instead of beating that dead ass technology horse, talk about contemporary writing you're reading or something. Jesus."⁶⁰⁹ Her views were highly critical, and she used Twitter and other online appearances to discuss the benefits of new media for emerging authors who do not have prestige like him. Replying to @laurathepoet on Twitter, Gay stated, "Writers should do what they want to do to promote their work. It is all about the hustle."⁶¹⁰ She values social media for its ability to make emerging authors more prominent. In doing so, she combats the criticism that prestige is diminished through selling the self.

instead of providing how to make the meal, Gay used these posts to spawn personal, social, and cultural analyses.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, October 5, 2013, 4:24 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/386587653442764801>.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., April 30, 2012, 3:28 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/197044763214610432>.

In *Salon*, she urged emerging authors to “get connected” and declared “social networking” provided “these connections [to other authors and to potential readers] in a low-pressure environment.”⁶¹¹ She made clear that writers should “get over the ‘self-promotion is gross’ thing.” These forms of “writing for free” allowed her to gain attention, build a support network of like-minded followers, and eventually have her work bought by publishers.⁶¹² One of the central arguments about writing on social media and for online publications is that it does not pay. This is correct in the literal sense that publishing a print book versus publishing digitally can reward the author with more money, but this is not the type of payment Gay stresses here. In a Bourdieuvian sense, Gay’s emergence as a legitimate author represents the types of payment digital writing provide. Although there are many arguments that can be made against using social media and online writing, she shows that through the actions and effort of the writer, one can construct an authorial identity that gains attention without succumbing to the negative effects of self-commodification.

Twitter and Tumblr become key tools in helping Gay assess the literary marketplace’s effects on authorial identity. In “Franzen Doesn’t Get Twitter,” she claimed Twitter was the platform of choice “[i]f you like babbling about nonsense, and current events, and occasionally sharing links to your work.”⁶¹³ This does not read like a deep revelation, but it does provide insight into how she approaches it as a component of her authorship. Not only is Twitter a space for her to promote her art, but it is a space that fulfills her need for connection and social

⁶¹¹ Gay, “Franzen Doesn’t Get Twitter,” *Salon*, March 7, 2012, accessed August 29, 2017, http://www.salon.com/2012/03/07/franzen_doesnt_get_twitter/.

⁶¹² Gay (@rgay), “I decided to stop writing for free at the beginning of the year but without writing for free I wouldn’t have sold either book,” Twitter, October 27, 2013, 11:15 a.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/394482604222599168>.

⁶¹³ Gay, “Franzen Doesn’t Get Twitter.”

engagement. Twitter's character limit does not lend itself to the essays Gay produces; however, it allows her to craft 140-character critiques and self-revelations alongside the promotion of her works.

In the same manner, her Tumblr becomes a site for taking the audience deeper into the intersection of authorship, commercialism, and technology, as well as race, gender, and body image. In "Some Thoughts on Promotion and Publicity + Free Books," Gay, again, analyzed the relationship between authors and social media. Her signature bluntness was on full display, especially with the declaration, "Suck it up and get on board with self-promotion."⁶¹⁴ This provided her an opportunity to flesh out her belief that social media allowed for a "behind-the-scenes" glimpse at the author, which was important to her own authorial performance.⁶¹⁵ Here, she leveraged her social media presences against literary tradition. Instead of falling victim to the negativity around social media as lesser forms of writing, Gay valorized them. Literary culture rewards her work on these platforms with the recognition she desires, moving her out of the Indie-Lit world and into the mainstream.

From 2014 to 2017, Gay experienced a dramatic rise in her visibility. This provided her with a larger platform to enact her authorial identity. Not only did her Twitter reach 319,000 followers by 2017, she expanded her online reach into more culturally prestigious publications. Her Tumblr posts became more socially conscious. The move from obscure intersectional author to public intellectual altered how she performed her authorial identity across online media. This newfound attention made her even more humble, as well as more committed to equality. Gay's

⁶¹⁴ Gay (roxanegay), Tumblr, May 28, 2013, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/51583327821/some-thoughts-on-promotion-and-publicity-free>.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

literary celebrity made her an identifiable embodiment of the personal as political in the literary world.

Digital media allow her to collapse the boundary between the serious author and the literary celebrity. Unlike authors who attempt to define the boundary between high art and middlebrow/low art, popular culture deeply affects Gay's performance of the author as intersectional. As her renown rose, she tweeted on December 18, 2013, "My new writer goal is to pull a Chimamanda and show up on Beys next album."⁶¹⁶ Gay's tweet recontextualized her fascination with popular culture, showing her desire to reach a certain level of literary celebrity. By highlighting the use of an acclaimed author by a popular musician, Gay illuminated that the divide between these two forms of culture were less restrictive, something that she consistently made clear on Twitter and Tumblr by professing her love for reality television, Channing Tatum, and Beyoncé.

More importantly, Gay's authorial identity became associated with online celebrity through her ever-increasing Twitter presence. Curating a following based around her Twitter persona, she performed her authorial identity, according to Shelia Heti, as a "Twitter celebrity" because her "Twitter work" was more prominent than her other writings.⁶¹⁷ As her celebrity grew, her sense of anonymity was ruptured. She admitted to Heti, "I also feel more exposed now

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., December 18, 2013, 2:47 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/413395086676746240>. Gay referenced Beyoncé's song "Formation," which sampled Adichie's "We Should All Be Feminists." Recently, Adichie addressed Beyoncé's use of her work and its effects in an interview with the German magazine *de Volkskrant* (October 7, 2016). In this interview, Adichie criticized the attention the song provided her because it reflected how "unimportant" literature had become compared to popular music. Adichie's statement reinforced the connotation that literature should have a higher cultural standing than lower arts such as pop music.

⁶¹⁷ Shelia Heti, "What Would Twitter Do?: Roxane Gay," *The Believer*, August 14, 2014, accessed September 25, 2017, <https://logger.believermag.com/post/2014/08/14/what-would-twitter-do-2?rq=roxane%20gay>.

that I've become a more visible writer but then I try to get over all that and just use Twitter the way I want."⁶¹⁸ Gay's self-consciousness toward her online image signified the platform's significance.⁶¹⁹ She desired to use it like the general public, but her role moved her further from this intention. Gay told Kocak, "There's a collapsing on Twitter that I think is very seductive."⁶²⁰ She discussed how she felt "closer" to the public figures she followed on Twitter, and it was this relationship that fed her desire for more information about these people's lives and experiences. This feature is common among most social media users, and a majority of these users, more than likely, experience a fetish-like desire. With this in mind, Gay becomes a fan, but her cultural role no longer allows for this; she, in turn, becomes the fetish object.

In the Tumblr post "Needing Easy," Gay discussed her rising literary celebrity. She expressed reservations about the development of and expectations around performing it because it required her to present more of herself to her ever-growing audience: "I feel exposed. It scares me to share so much of myself. I don't want the focus on me. I am just me. The writing is what matters, not the writer, right?"⁶²¹ Her question raises a central critique of authorship. Gay found the idea of writerly success strange, and she declared she was "loath to use the word" because she was "a writer."⁶²² Ultimately, success causes the writer to fully commit to the character that emerges within media. This performance shifts the focus toward the celebration of the author rather than the literary work.

⁶¹⁸ Heti, "What Would Twitter Do?: Roxane Gay."

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Kocak, "Bad Feminist's Roxane Gay: 'I'm Loath to Use the Word 'Success.'"

⁶²¹ Gay (roxanegay), "Needing Easy," Tumblr, April 28, 2014, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/84186204460/needing-easy>.

⁶²² Kocak, "Bad Feminist's Roxane Gay: 'I'm Loath to Use the Word 'Success.'"

Gay's character was that of an author working at the intersections of multiple identities and media. Literary celebrity made her conscious of her performance and its effects on her audience. For instance, Gay described in "Needing Easy" a book signing she did after a workshop in Columbus, OH. A young fan approached her and said she "was a celebrity to her." Gay admitted that the news was uncomfortable because it was not something she expected, but she played along and autographed the fan's hand.⁶²³ Although she shied from the attention and categorization as a celebrity, her actions reinforced the shift toward her as the desirable object. The autograph on the fan's body mirrors the images of musicians and actors signing, predominately female fans', bodies. This sexualized image is performative because it disrupts traditional authorial representation. Gay becomes for this young woman a fetish object, and the fan becomes for Gay a representation of her public desirability. Her first reaction does not remove the fact that she participates in the fulfillment of a desire. By autographing the fan's body, Gay collapses the line between her authorial identity and celebrity character.

In a similar but none the less stereotypical celebrity image, Gay tweeted, "Waitress just now: you are an author, aren't you. Nod nod nod."⁶²⁴ The context of the tweet was unclear, but it could be assumed that the waitress was highly familiar with not only Gay's work but also her media appearances. The year difference between events showed that Gay's success and cultural recognition had spread wider, not only through her bestselling book *Bad Feminist* but also through her online presences. "Tweeting has definitely expanded the reach of my work," she told Heti.⁶²⁵ This type of experience became common for Gay, and her reaction showed it was not an

⁶²³ Gay (roxanegay), "Needing Easy." A photograph was included as proof.

⁶²⁴ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, October 5, 2015, <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/650749054159335426>.

⁶²⁵ Heti, "What Would Twitter Do?: Roxane Gay."

unalloyed pleasure. According to her, “social media has upped the ante for stepping out of line and that frightens me because it seems like there’s less room for error—and I think we have to have room for error.”⁶²⁶ These encounters in real public spaces reinforce the encroachment of the performance upon the person. Instead of allowing the work to speak for itself, Gay must now perform her authorial identity outside of the confines of her media presences, making her lived experiences as a Black woman even more fraught.

The shift in Gay’s recognition disrupts her performance of authorship because it makes her conscious of the expectations audiences have toward her as a public figure. Quoting Nina Bargiel’s tweet, which asked about her “most unexpected” aspects of her life, Gay tweeted that “[h]aving to be public as a writer” was the most unexpected because she “write[s] to be behind the scenes.”⁶²⁷ Authors should be secondary to the text, not the primary focus, according to Gay. Even in today’s celebrity obsessed society, many writers do not imagine having to participate in this type of commodification. They believe that the traditional aspects of authorship still hold sway, while at the same time, they participate in writing for social media and other online publications. Being interviewed on *The Rumpus*, she discussed how she has dealt with her categorization as a public intellectual and its effects on her ability to write:

I never imagined that I would be the kind of person who is recognized when I am out and about just living my life. I never imagined any of the success I am currently experiencing. My dream was to write a book and see it published. I didn’t dare imagine anything beyond that, so, I’m trying to keep my head on my shoulders. I am trying so very hard to stay in the moment despite the ferocity of my ambition. I am trying to keep growing and

⁶²⁶ Kocak, “Bad Feminist’s Roxane Gay: ‘I’m Loath to Use the Word ‘Success.’”

⁶²⁷ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, August 19, 2016, 10:06 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/766818567509516288>.

improving as a writer. I don't want the success to go away. I don't want it to seem unearned.⁶²⁸

Two currents exist in Gay's statement, presenting the tension between performative acts as writer and performative acts as public figure. Her humility provided her with a way to downplay celebrity, but her language revealed the constant need to reinforce the Other's validity within literary culture. As she admitted in the web publication *The Creative Independent*, "A lot of people treat me and other public intellectuals—even though I don't really think of myself that way—as vending machines, just there available to offer opinions."⁶²⁹ The collapse between Gay the writer and Gay the author demands her to constantly perform. Hiding behind her Twitter, Tumblr, and other online writing is no longer an option because her audience and trolls directly engage her.

By acting out this role, she became a target for many online trolls. This onslaught took its toll on her as an author, as well as a private individual. Twitter became a battleground, and Gay used the platform to reinforce her stance and to criticize the ways social media have been coopted to terrorize public figures. On August 20, 2016, she tweeted, "I love writing and being able to talk about culture and social issues. I hate the constant harassment. It is soul draining."⁶³⁰ The trolling she experienced could be interpreted as simply backlash against a woman of color voicing her opinion. In other words, online trolls found it offensive that Gay shed light upon

⁶²⁸ Abigail Bereola, "The Rumpus Interview with Roxane Gay," *The Rumpus*, January 4, 2017, accessed August 29, 2017, <http://therumpus.net/2017/01/the-rumpus-interview-with-roxane-gay/>.

⁶²⁹ Brandon Stosuy, "Roxane Gay on the Importance of Storytelling," *The Creative Independent*, November 30, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/roxane-gay-on-the-importance-of-storytelling/>.

⁶³⁰ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, August 20, 2016, 9:34 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/767173096939847680>.

social oppression in public. Although she told Heti she believed, “Twitter has allowed the conversation [around feminism] to broaden and become more inclusive,” this broadening included the constant trolling from voices that sought to maintain an oppressive culture.⁶³¹ Trolls found Gay’s authorial identity to be a threat, and at the same time, they viewed her public visibility as an easy target. Again, social and other digital media blur the boundaries between private and public, creating an inability for Gay to escape from her public role. On April 6, 2016, she tweeted in regard to the slippage that often occurred when a person became a public figure: “I’m a writer but I am also a human being. If you forget that remind yourself.”⁶³² This collapse between the private and public selves shows that her authorial identity obscures how the public engages with her. By viewing her as a public figure and not a person, trolls and even her followers cast Gay as a media character, stripped of her actual self.

At the same time as she experienced this constant threat, Gay used her place as a prominent author to take down these trolls. For example, a major action she made in her performance of authorship was using her literary celebrity to affect how publisher’s approach potential authors. In January 2017, she pulled her upcoming book from Simon and Schuster because they were publishing a book by the right-wing extremist Milo Yiannopoulos. Gay provided *Buzzfeed* with her statement before any other publications. By giving *Buzzfeed* the scoop on this literary news, she lent it cultural capital. She published her full statement on her Tumblr, later, which was shared in mainstream publications such as *The Washington Post*. In “All I really need to say:,” Gay discussed how Simon and Schuster ignored the hateful rhetoric of Yiannopoulos, making them seem “fine with his racist and xenophobic and sexist

⁶³¹ Heti, ““What Would Twitter Do?: Roxane Gay.”

⁶³² Gay (@rgay), Twitter, April 6, 2016, 2:11 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/717776791319023617>.

ideologies.”⁶³³ Her identity as an intersectional author caused her to react, and she believed that pulling the book showed that authors would not be associated with a company that published someone like Yiannopoulos. With this in mind, she acknowledged that her place in the literary world allowed her to make this artistic and financial decision that less prominent writers could not make, and she understood their positions.⁶³⁴ Through this performative act, Gay used her identity as a celebrity and intersectional author to affect the publication of a person who supported harmful ideologies. Her actions reinforced her place in the literary world as a proponent of equality.

Digital media give Gay the opportunity to create and establish a following around her authorial identity. Performing her authorship within these media before publishing in print indicates how other authors who emerge during the twenty-first-century also place high value on new media. Gay’s appearances in gynocentric online publications, emerging cultural sites, and social media permit her to construct an authorial identity based upon her politically charged lived experiences. The niche and inclusive nature of these media allow her to present herself as openly and “real” as she likes. At the same time, Gay replicates many of the traditions of authorship.

⁶³³ Gay (roxanegay), “All I need to say:,” Tumblr, February 20, 2017, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/157506508260/all-i-really-need-to-say>. See also, Roxane Gay (@rgay), “Did I mention that Simon & Schuster moved the release date of *Dangerous* to June 13, the day *Hunger* is coming out? Oh wait.....,” Twitter, February 20, 2017, 7:11 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/833831444355149824>, and Roxane Gay (@rgay), “But it was not a coincidence. It was malicious. And that’s how I will forever think of Simon & Schuster,” Twitter, February 20, 2017, 7:16 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/833832717716439042>.

⁶³⁴ Jarry Lee, “‘Bad Feminist’ Author Pulls Book From Simon & Schuster Over Milo Yiannopoulos Controversy,” *BuzzFeed*, January 25, 2017, accessed August 29, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/jarrylee/roxane-gay-pulls-book-from-simon-schuster-in-response-to-mil?utm_term=.twWjjvEvN#.ciDkkGBGE.

Her authorship “contain[s] multitudes,” as she told Mensah Demary in *Electric Lit*.⁶³⁵ These multitudes are affected by literary history and the issues of contemporary society.

In the following section, I analyze the audio/visual representations of Roxane Gay. Similar to how she performed across digital media, Gay takes on the role of intersectional author and uses her literary celebrity to promote issues that are central to its ideologies. At the same time as she performs her authorial identity as a humble yet strong Black woman, vulnerability emerges. This vulnerability becomes evident through the visual media of photography, video, and television. Her tough public facing identity cracks, providing the audience with a closer look at the fragile woman beneath. Notwithstanding, Gay’s representation as a prominent author is strengthened through these appearances, and through them, she adds depth to her authorial performance.

Recording the Intersections

Gay’s rise establishes a contrast between the historical notion that authors are not visible figures and contemporary culture’s obsession with images. Literary celebrity alters how she is represented across all media, but it is especially significant in her appearances in audio/visual media. Her movement from digital Indie-Lit writer into *New York Times* bestselling author and public intellectual increased her public presence. The publications she appeared in over this time ranged from independent online magazines and podcasts to nationally aired radio and television

⁶³⁵ Mensah Demary, “Roxane Gay Is Feeling Ambitious,” *Electric Lit*, January 3, 2017, accessed August 29, 2017, <https://electricliterature.com/roxane-gay-is-feeling-ambitious-bd4bf4458591>. Gay made this statement verbatim earlier in her career. See John Freeman, “Roxane Gay,” *BOMB* 128 (Summer 2014), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/10067/roxane-gay>.

programs. Alongside this progression, her photographic images shift to support not only how she performs the author as intersectional but also how she is represented as a cultural figure.

These media reinforce the character traits Gay developed in her digital presences. She is simultaneously humble, defiant, and determined, but at the same time, she is more vulnerable. In these media, Gay is countered by the invisible ways society creates difference between the visual representations of white male authors and minority authors. The topics open for discussion during radio or television interviews and the ways her portraits are shot all work together to place her within the tradition of women writers, even though she performs beyond this categorization. She tweeted on August 3, 2012 “that as woman you’re generally critiqued as a person, not as a writer or thinker.”⁶³⁶ This assessment pervades much of Gay’s audio/visual presences. Her images bridge the tense intersection between Other and respected literary celebrity.

The visual image dominates portions of the contemporary conversation around authors, which directly opposes how many writers approach crafting an authorial identity, and Gay is no exception. Terry Gross commented to Gay that “people know what you look like,” and she acknowledged this, but she reminded Gross that it was not her reason for writing. She stated, “You know, one of the many reasons I’m a writer is because I didn’t want to be, like, an actor on a stage or on the screen.”⁶³⁷ The dichotomy between author and actor stems from literary history because the theater did not have the same prestige as literature, and thus actors were seen as

⁶³⁶ Gay (@rgay), “I will also add, now that I’m heated, that as woman you’re generally critiqued as a person, not as a writer or thinker,” Twitter, August 3, 2012, 12:31 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/231427195913007105>.

⁶³⁷ Terry Gross, “Be Bigger, Fight Harder: Roxane Gay on a Lifetime of ‘Hunger.’” *NPR* audio, 44:02, June 19, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/06/19/533515895/be-bigger-fight-harder-roxane-gay-on-a-lifetime-of-hunger>.

lesser public figures.⁶³⁸ However, the line between actor and author is not as distinct nowadays. Gay found fault in merging the two identities because she believed that it affected literary value and tradition. She tweeted on April 6, 2009, “I hate when editors ask for a picture. If I wanted to be seen, I’d have been an actor, not a writer.”⁶³⁹ She highlighted how there was tremendous value placed upon *seeing* the author. Few authors can avoid the camera. If they can or do, an aura builds around their visual representation and a cultish desire forms around visually capturing the elusive author. Other than a select few, such as Thomas Pynchon, J.D. Salinger, and Elena Ferrante, who have made rejecting visual culture part of their authorial performances, most authors must participate in this selling of themselves. Clearly, Gay finds this highly troubling. For example, her first book *Ayiti* did not contain an author photograph. It can be argued that this was a conscious choice because it reinforced the sentiment she made in her tweet and later to Gross.

Regardless of her desire to let the work stand on its own artistic merits, the literary marketplace demands Gay participate in the visual performance of authorship. The image that appeared online during the promotional cycle for *Ayiti* played with the perception of the author’s professional image. Across multiple publications, she appeared dressed in a black t-shirt and dark frame glasses. Her hair was in disarray, and she held her iPhone.⁶⁴⁰ Gay’s mirror-selfie

⁶³⁸ See Roach, *It*.

⁶³⁹ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, April 6, 2009, 1:56 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/1464266262>.

⁶⁴⁰ See figure 1, Selfie used as promotional photograph, Roxane Gay, photographer, from Abby Koski, “Interview: Roxane Gay,” *Melville House*, November 18, 2011, accessed September 26, 2017, <https://www.mhpbooks.com/interview-roxane-gay/>. This selfie appeared as the author image on the webpage for Gay’s first appearance on *OtherPPL*. See Brad Listi, “Episode 34—Roxane Gay,” *OtherPPL* podcast, 1:11:42, January 11, 2012, <http://otherppl.com/roxane-gay-interview/>.

deconstructed the standard author portrait, much like Tao Lin's early images. It stripped the picture of its professionalism and replaced it with amateurism. The setting appeared to be an office or conference room, which further destabilized it. By providing this type of portrait to promote *Ayiti*, Gay made a performative statement about the value placed upon the author's image. The distorted mirror-selfie allowed her to focus the audience's attention on the work and not her look.



Fig. 1: Selfie, Roxane Gay, photographer, from Abby Koski, "Interview: Roxane Gay," *Melville House*, November 18, 2011, accessed September 26, 2017, <https://www.mhpbooks.com/interview-roxane-gay/>.

This, however, did not satisfy the strong demand for the author's image. Other mediators still valued the professionalism of portraits and their ability to market authorial identity. Gay criticized this constant pressure in a tweet on January 5, 2012: "Why are people so bewildered that I don't have a professional author photo. I don't have a big fancy book."⁶⁴¹ A minute after this, she tweeted, "I am asked for a photo like 5 times a week. I get it but it is also sometimes, like, UGH. Writer not model. Writer not model."⁶⁴² Although she admitted to "get[ting] it," this reinforced her traditional view that authors should hide behind the work. Literary culture's

⁶⁴¹ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, January 5, 2012, 3:04 a.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/154835635075682304>.

⁶⁴² Ibid., 3:05 a.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/154835794576683008>.

distinction between *author* and *writer* that truly affected how Gay was perceived. In order to cultivate a following, the literary world constructs a character around writers, with or without their active participation, and Gay provides visual traits of her authorial identity while she attempts to deconstruct the author portrait. Her clothes mirrored one of the traditional aspects associated with serious authors—the color black. Instead of the black suit or dress shirt serious male authors wore, she signified her casual nature and down-to-earth status through the black t-shirt.⁶⁴³ She was not a literary celebrity at the time, and her clothing reflected that.

Clothes and other body accessories play an important role in Gay’s visual performances. Her appearance becomes marked through her body, and she views her body as a performative representation of her identity as an author. In the Tumblr post “Real Talk Topics,” she described her wardrobe and its effects on her desire to be seen in public:

I have a uniform—dark jeans, dark shirt. I rarely stray from this uniform. It makes me feel...invisible. I know it’s not like the Harry Potter cape of invisibility but I can pretend pretty well. Once in a while, I think, ‘I am going to mix things up today,’ and I will wear, say, black slacks instead of dark jeans. I might even wear a blouse or a pop of color. [...] Then people have to comment, like, ‘Oh, you’re dressed up today!’ or ‘Looking good,’ and I freak out inside and my first thought is, ‘I am going back to the uniform, immediately’ I don’t want to be noticed or seen.⁶⁴⁴

By calling her clothes “a uniform,” she placed herself into the “writer as worker” conception of authorship. Her “uniform” provided her with a consistent appearance, and only through a deviation from this consistency did her identity shift. Deviation from her standard appearance not only disrupted her performance for others but also her own understanding of her identity. The “uniform” provided Gay and her audience with comfort.

⁶⁴³ See figure 2.

⁶⁴⁴ Gay (roxanegay), “Real Talk Topics,” Tumblr, April 17, 2013, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/48232446046/real-talk-topics>.

Not visible in her selfie are her forearm tattoos, but they are part of her uniform. In almost every other public image of her, the tattoos are present, delineating her difference from the professional image of authorship. On June 21, 2012, Gay reblogged a Tumblr post from *Library Journal*. The original post linked to a project by illustrator Wendy MacNaughton entitled *Pen & Ink: Tattoos and the Stories Behind Them*. The illustration depicted a few of Gay's seven forearm tattoos and she provided a paragraph explaining their significance. She claimed the tattoos allowed her to intentionally determine how her body looked. This gave her a sense of pride.⁶⁴⁵ The tattoos provided a sense of difference beyond the traditional social constructions of gender and race. Her tattoos literally and figuratively mark her body outside of the norms of literary culture; she becomes a corporeal intersection of difference.

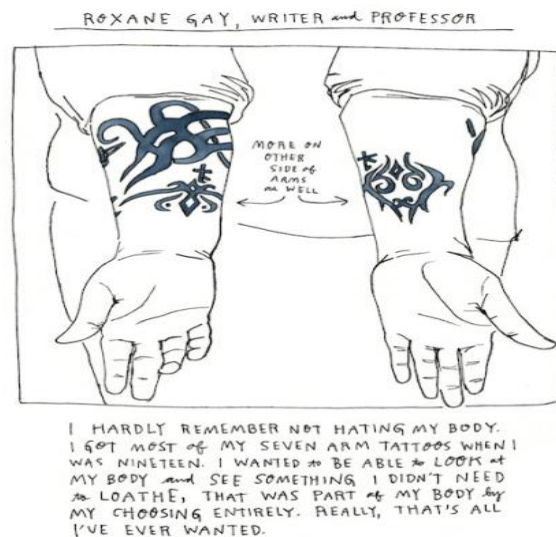


Fig 2: Illustration of Gay's tattooed forearms, Wendy MacNaughton, illustrator, from *Pen & Ink: Tattoos and the Stories Behind Them*, Tumblr, June 19, 2012, <http://penandink.tumblr.com/post/25440077566>.

⁶⁴⁵ See figure 2, Illustration of Gay's tattooed forearms, Wendy MacNaughton, illustrator, from *Pen & Ink: Tattoos and the Stories Behind Them*, Tumblr, June 19, 2012, <http://penandink.tumblr.com/post/25440077566>.

Even while she constructed a visual image of her authorship, Gay appeared in audio media to promote her first print book. Unlike her future appearances in this medium, podcasts provided her with the opportunity to be heard by an audience outside of her classroom or underground literature. One of her first podcast interviews occurred with Brad Listi on *OtherPPL* in 2012. She promoted *Ayiti*, but also her authorial identity. Her mirror-selfie appeared on the podcast's website to give the audience a visual image to go along with the auditory one. The website also provided a description of Gay as "one of indie lit's most industrious and prolific writers."⁶⁴⁶ This labeled her as a professional, and the accompanying audio reinforced this representation with slight divergences into Romanticism.

The podcast devoted significant time to introducing Gay. Listi opened by stating that "if you spend any time at all online in the world of independent literature, um, she's sort of ubiquitous," and that "[h]er presence can be felt everywhere" in the digital literary world.⁶⁴⁷ His descriptions highlighted Gay's publishing in "too many to mention" anthologies and her online presences. This contextualization built her image as a serious author. The introduction placed her outside of the stereotypes of digital authorship. This further strengthened when Gay stated, "I have been graced with the gift of being able to write pretty much under any circumstance," followed a discussion of her insomnia and how she did not believe it affected her ability to write; actually, it helped her achieve the label prolific.⁶⁴⁸ Conversely, her statement romanticized her. By claiming she was "graced" and could "write [...]" under any circumstance," Gay implied that inspiration struck her spontaneously. As she was cast as a professional who worked hard to

⁶⁴⁶ Brad Listi, "Episode 34—Roxane Gay" *OtherPPL* podcast, 1:11:42, January 11, 2012, <http://otherppl.com/roxane-gay-interview/>.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

achieve her levels of renown, she also felt the effects Romanticism still had within literary culture.

These contrasting traditions of authorship were stressed again toward the end of the interview. Listi introduced her as both writer and professor. She told him that she “just love[s] writing” and that all of her work would not have been possible if she did not have a teaching job. Eventually, Gay stated, “I’m a realist,” proceeding then to comment on how she did not imagine a time when she would be able to solely write without teaching or another job.⁶⁴⁹ The value of literature in contemporary culture requires authors to have day jobs unless they are tremendously successful, and Gay is not naïve to this fact. She knows financial success for literary figures is limited at best. This knowledge fuels her acceptance that teaching allows her authorial identity to exist. She shies away from the Romantic view that to create art one must suffer, and instead, she allows the pragmatic understanding that art and literature are not contemporary paths to economic security to affect how she performs.

These traits provide Gay with the ability to politicize many of the ways authors are envisioned. The double standards surrounding women authors’ portraits and their relationship to artistic merit cause her to be highly critical of the ways sexism pervades literary culture. Her critical stance not only stems from her identity as a feminist but also as an author against the privileging of visual images. In the Tumblr post “Hideous Scribbling Women,” which alludes to Hawthorne’s famous condemnation, Gay described how the phrase “fetching author photo” irked her when reading a book preview.⁶⁵⁰ She took issue with the fact that very few, if any, male authors were judged by their physical features. She conceded that “looks matter” in our culture,

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Gay (roxanegay), “Hideous Scribbling Women,” Tumblr, February 8, 2013, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/42591972084/hideous-scribbling-women>.

but she stressed that the application of sexist beauty standards to women authors was misguided.⁶⁵¹ Her criticism of the difference between images of women authors and male authors reinforced her intersectional authorial identity. She desired to create change by calling out the system of representation.

Nevertheless, her increasing recognition required a stronger visual presence than she had established. She refined her image to better market her authorship. On December 9, 2013, Gay tweeted, “I need another author photo taken but my self-esteem is not up to it. I’m a writer specifically because I enjoy not being seen.”⁶⁵² Gay’s self-consciousness hindered her engagement with these media, but it was her internalized views of authorship that created the most tension.

The conflict between her attempts to hide behind her literary output and the literary marketplace’s desire to see the author cause her to reluctantly participate in the visual commodification of authorship. Subsequently, the publication of her first novel, *An Untamed State*, and her collection of essays, *Bad Feminist*, by mainstream publishers provided her growing audience with highly professional portraits. One of the images first appeared on Gay’s Twitter. She tweeted the image on January 31, 2014 with the line, “Here is the author photo I like.”⁶⁵³ The picture was a close-up of Gay cradling her head in her hands. It blended Gay’s body through her uniform of black into the background’s dark grays, highlighting her skin tone and

⁶⁵¹ Ibid.

⁶⁵² Gay (@rgay), Twitter, December 9, 2013, 6:35 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/410191048200028160>.

⁶⁵³ Ibid., January 31, 2014, 5:34 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/429382168431697920>.

salt and pepper hair.⁶⁵⁴ Jay Graibec, the photographer, produced multiple versions of this image. The one published with *Bad Feminist* cropped out Gay's arms, much like the one she tweeted. With the publication of her memoir *Hunger* (Harper Perennial, 2017), the portrait was reframed as a medium shot, revealing her forearm tattoos.

This was not the only image circulating from Gay's photo shoot with Graibec. Before she tweeted her preferred photograph, she wrote, "I have been topped into getting another author photo tomorrow. You win universe. Ima comb my hair."⁶⁵⁵ It is unclear as to which Graibec photograph she referred to in this tweet, but a slippage in language revealed the tension between her authorial identity and the literary marketplace. Her use of the word "topped" can be read as a typo; the word "talked" would be grammatically correct. At the same time, as fellow writer Ashley C. Ford (@iSmashFizzLe) recognized in her comment, "topped" represents the emerging author's low place in literary culture. Gay possibly protested another photo shoot or she supplied an image that did not meet her publishers' or agents' standards for authorial representation. "Topped" signifies the lack of power Gay holds as an author at this time. If she wants to publish in print and become a legitimate author, then she must comply with the demands of the literary marketplace. Nonetheless, another image was produced and used as the author photograph for *An Untamed State*. The second Graibec portrait depicted her standing in a windowed corridor, leaning against a pillar. She wore her uniform—black shirt—and her forearm tattoos were barely visible at the bottom of the picture.⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵⁴ See figure 3, left image, professional author photographs used for the majority of Gay's media appearances, Jay Graibec, photographer, 2014.

⁶⁵⁵ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, January 30, 2014, 4:41 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/429006430666887169>.

⁶⁵⁶ See figure 4, right image, professional author photographs used for the majority of Gay's media appearances, Jay Graibec, photographer, 2014.

These images have been used consistently since their production across print, visual, and digital media. As these images construct Gay's identity as a serious author, they replicate the gendered difference in visual representations of authors. The two photographs light Gay in a way that many males are not lit. The natural light of the hallway and the studio light cast Gay outside of the traditions of authoritative, male authorship where they are typically lit from behind or above. These two images soften her features, presenting her as natural, down-to-earth, and real, as opposed to the Romantic images of serious male authors. Also, the picture used for *Bad Feminist* and *Hunger* showed Gay smirking and looking upward. This pose highlighted her humor and mixed it with her witty cultural criticism. Even though it attempted to validate Gay's knowledge and ability as a cultural critic, the image softened the content by showing her playfulness. The playfulness mirrors her writing, but it is the visual representation of this side of her authorship that strips her authorial performance of its power. The prominence of these images reinforced her ambivalence toward the literary marketplace's obsession with visualizing the author. Using them as the visual identifiers of all of her print works from 2014 to 2017 shows she now holds some control over her representation. Regardless, her visual images become commodities that sell her audiences consistent identities. This consistency is capitalized on as Gay's literary celebrity grows.



Fig. 3: Professional author photographs used for the majority of Gay's media appearances, Jay Graibec, photographer, 2014.

The publication of *An Untamed State* and *Bad Feminist* brought about a further development in the creation of visual images around Gay. The constant encroachment of visual representation into Gay's life as a writer, professor, and individual meant she must carefully interact with the media. In the Tumblr post "Beneath the Same Sky," she described a photo shoot at her home: "A photographer came to my house today. I am loathe to have my picture taken under any circumstances, so it was trying. It was also a lot of fun. 'Let yourself enjoy this,' I reminded myself, and so I did. She and her assistants were here for two and a half hours, posing me like an action figure. I am a writer. It was surreal. I took pictures of them taking my picture."⁶⁵⁷ Her resistance to becoming a commodity greatly affected her authorial performance, but the paragraph revealed her acceptance of this process. Perhaps what was most revealing was her joy during the photo shoot. By accepting and, ultimately, embracing visual commodification, Gay's intersectional authorial identity is fully validated in the literary world.

⁶⁵⁷ Gay (roxanegay), "Beneath the Same Sky," Tumblr, July 17, 2014, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/92074992540/beneath-the-same-sky>. Gay inserted a photograph of the photographer taking a picture.

Gay's appearances in audio/visual media reached a new point during the promotion of *Bad Feminist*. Literary celebrity began to affect how she was represented in these media, especially on television, where she made her first appearance on a nationally broadcast news program. She appeared on Melissa Harris-Perry's MSNBC show on September 21, 2014. Gay exuded comfort, reinforcing her acceptance of the visual selling of authorship. She wore a modified version of her uniform: a black and gray sweater instead of a black shirt. Particularly striking were her tattoos. They were visible above the desk, and Gay's or the stylists' decision to keep them revealed worked against the professional image of the news show. While describing *Bad Feminist* and Gay's accomplishments, Harris-Perry called Gay "possibly the new empress of nerd-land."⁶⁵⁸ She valorized Gay as a prominent geek culture icon, reinforcing the contrast present in Gay's authorial performance. On the one hand, she cast herself as an author capable of critically analyzing important socio-cultural issues such as gender, race, sexuality, and equality, while on the other hand, she embraced her consumption of popular culture. These dual sides of her authorial performance place her at the intersection of literary and popular culture, not only in her works but in her role as an author, something Harris-Perry stressed during the segment.

However, Harris-Perry's fangirl proclamation did not elide the fact that she stressed Gay's literary credentials. She inquired about the value placed upon literature in contemporary society and Gay lit up. Responding to the question, she emphasized her lived experiences as both writer and reader to highlight the important role of literature: "Absolutely. Writing matters more than ever. And I have to believe that so I can keep making a living, but I also know that words matter because of the impact that I've seen my book have and because of the impact, quite

⁶⁵⁸ Melissa Harris-Perry, "Reconciling Feminism and Imperfection," *MSNBC*, online video, 4:19, September 21, 2014, <http://www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/watch/reconciling-feminism-and-imperfection-331777603849>.

frankly, that books have had on me throughout my life.”⁶⁵⁹ Gay’s pragmatic outlook on the literary marketplace conflates two historically separate traditions of authorship. By doing this, she becomes more complicit in making her authorial identity a commodity.

One of Gay’s more recognizable appearances occurred at TEDWomen in May 2015. In this talk, she discussed *Bad Feminist* and extended the ideas expressed in the book to clarify the bad feminist identity she adopted.⁶⁶⁰ The TED video captured her enacting a version of her authorial identity that would dominate its visual representation in the coming years, that of the literary celebrity. The celebrity image is something she finds extremely problematic, but also ironic since she has become one. Gay deflected the identity of feminist icon and reconstructed herself as a representation of difference in the TEDWomen talk. She proclaimed, “Like I said, I am a mess—consider me knocked off that pedestal before you ever try to put me up there.”⁶⁶¹ She criticized the worship of “visible feminists.” Similar to her other works, Gay admitted that glorifying celebrity feminists ran counter to the feminist movement. Celebritization led her to identify as a bad feminist, who operated against stereotypical feminists: “I was labeled a woman who doesn’t play by the rules, who expects too much, who thinks far too highly of myself, by daring to believe I’m equal—(coughs)—superior to a man. You don’t want to be that rebel woman, until you realize that you very much are that woman and cannot imagine being anyone else.”⁶⁶² For Gay, assuming a feminist identity allowed her to embrace the contradictory

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁰ Gay, “Confessions of a Bad Feminist,” filmed May 2015 at TEDWomen 2015, TED video, 11:28, https://www.ted.com/talks/roxane_gay_confessions_of_a_bad_feminist.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶⁶² Ibid. The transcription of the talk provided on TED.com supplies the word “cough” to indicate the sound Gay makes. I read the sound as a subtle “humph” or slight chuckle. This more

elements of herself, and it was through these contradictions that she used writing and language to strengthen her and others identity performances.

At the same time as she began to be cast as a literary celebrity and a public intellectual, Gay's visual image broke from the consistency she established in her author portraits and other visual appearances. She wore a striped lavender and blue blouse with dark jeans, and her tattoos were exposed. The slight modification of her "uniform" disrupted the prevailing image. The use of bright colors became prominent after the TEDWomen talk, which signified a shift in the way Gay wanted to be depicted in visual media and a growing confidence in her own skin. These wardrobe variances show her complicity in embracing the commodification of the author as she gains cultural capital.

The marketplace's desire for Gay and her specific type of authorship caused her to engage with other media personalities differently than in the past. This change became more prominent with the promotion of her most recent books: the short story collection *Difficult Women* (Grove Press, 2017) and the memoir *Hunger* (Harper Perennial, 2017). Much like her last promotional circuits, Gay straddled the divide between fiction and nonfiction, playing the dual authorial roles dictated by each genre. These roles were not new to Gay; however, the success she had achieved as a nonfiction writer placed greater significance upon that side of her authorial performance.

She made her second appearance on *OtherPPL* on January 11, 2017. Both Gay and Listi's podcast had gained significant cultural capital, yet Gay's gains far surpassed those made by the podcast. This aspect of her authorship dominated much of the conversation. Listi told Gay right from the beginning that she was "a writer who has succeeded in ways that a lot of writers

accurately transcribes the humor but also truth behind Gay's statement. Gay used humor throughout the performance to help the audience accept the weight of her ideas.

wish to succeed in” and that he believed she was “able to speak with authority” on a wide array of topics.⁶⁶³ Her signature humility emerged during her response to his statements regarding her success: “You know, not really because I’m generally focused on what’s right in front of me and what’s consuming me in a given moment. And, you know, the reality is that I exist at the intersection of a lot of interesting places.” Later, Gay claimed she had “[n]o fucking idea” how she became a successful author and public intellectual, and she jokingly stated that “any time a black person can string words together white people get very excited.” Although she provided a witty response, Gay’s language illuminated how her authorial identity still centered on the fight for equality. Race affected her rise to celebrity author status more than some cultural figures would like to admit, but her pragmatic attitude revealed the hidden elements.

Iconizing Gay as a public intellectual moved her authorial identity away from her desire to be represented as a fiction writer. This continued push by literary culture to categorize her alters her performance. When Listi asked her about how she handled being a public intellectual, Gay responded, “You know, I’m still working on accepting that.” She described how she gained a sense of the “reach” of some of the publications she had begun writing for and that this newfound identity further alienated her from others. It was a feeling of being “not human” that made her skeptical of embracing this identity. No longer was she just a writer; she became a consumable object, or as Listi stated, “an avatar” for diversity.

The personal nature of Gay’s works conflates the writer with the image distributed along with them. She becomes the subject and object through a collapsing of authorial distance. She is no longer just a writer; she is a character. Her appearance on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* coincided with the promotion of *Hunger*, her memoir about her body and sexual assault. This

⁶⁶³ Listi, “Episode 448—Roxane Gay.”

revealed her vulnerability. The appearance provided Gay with a platform to discuss the serious issues behind the book, but the comedic tone of the show softened the subject matter and her authorial identity. One way her image was softened was through her wardrobe. Instead of wearing her uniform, Gay appeared in a blue and white striped blouse. Large amounts of makeup had been applied to her cheeks, and her hair had been styled heavily. The only consistencies with previous visual images were Gay's forearm tattoos and dark jeans.⁶⁶⁴ The way she was styled during this interview reinforced the difference between her appearances in literary media versus her appearances in popular media. Visually representing her vulnerability and womanliness, Gay's authorial identity assumed these traits. Her recognition as an intersectional author was dulled through this overt feminization. Instead of supporting her claims of performing feminism against type, the images of Gay from *The Daily Show* cast her as a victim of society, something she vehemently refuted in her work.



Fig. 4: Gay with Trevor Noah, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, “Roxane Gay- Fitting Into the World in ‘Hunger’- the Extended Interview,” *Comedy Central*, online video, 7:22, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/oifn27/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-roxane-gay---fitting-into-the-world-in--hunger----extended-interview>.

⁶⁶⁴ See figure 4, Gay with Trevor Noah, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, “Roxane Gay- Fitting Into the World in ‘Hunger’- the Extended Interview,” *Comedy Central*, online video, 7:22, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/oifn27/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah-roxane-gay---fitting-into-the-world-in--hunger----extended-interview>.

The print section of this chapter takes a closer look at how Gay uses traditional literary media. While she built a role for herself online and extended that image through its representations across audio/visual channels, print provides her with the prestige she desires. Even more so, her literary celebrity emerges from the success of her print publications rather than from her other media presences. Print becomes a way for Gay to legitimize her difference and counteract literary tradition by performing the author as intersectional within literary culture's medium of choice.

Printing the Intersections

As with most other serious authors, print publication validates Gay. She values the prestige of print, and it becomes a medium to deconstruct the system from within. Her fight for equality becomes mired in the traditions of publishing, however. By gaining prestige through print media, Gay performs the author as intersectional at a crossroads between media traditions and difference.

The publication of *Ayiti* provided Gay a book with which to market her authorial identity. *The Kenyon Review*, a respected literary magazine, conducted an interview with her shortly after its publication. Weston Cutter described Gay's credentials through her publication history, her involvement with the literary magazine *Pank*, and her editorship of Tiny Hardcore Press.⁶⁶⁵ This contextualized her place in the literary world beyond just authorship. However, a dichotomy emerged during the interview between Gay the printed author and Gay the digital author. Cutter

⁶⁶⁵ Weston Cutter, "A Brief Interview with Roxane Gay," *The Kenyon Review*, December 14, 2011, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.kenyonreview.org/2011/12/a-brief-interview-with-roxane-gay/>.

claimed he was “more curious” about her because she maintained such a large online presence, and he wondered if she kept these two identities separate. Gay collapsed the two into components of her authorial identity:

I don’t really make a distinction between my real world self and my online self in terms of what I say and how I say it. One of the finest compliments someone ever paid me was that I was the same in person as i [sic] was in my online interactions. Certainly, even though I blog, there are parts of my life I don’t discuss online because I don’t see a need for it but I don’t find that distinction matters very much. I can’t afford to be one way in my real life and another way online so I’m the same way in both places though certainly, I am much shyer in real life.⁶⁶⁶

She contended that “identity badges” were ways to restrict literary value, even though her works fell inside the broad categories of feminist and Black literature.⁶⁶⁷ Gay carries this idea throughout much of her performance of authorship, towing the line between author of difference and author of inclusion.

As she was writing prolifically across digital media and preparing *An Untamed State* and *Bad Feminist* for print publication, Gay began publishing nonfiction in *The Nation* in 2013. *The Nation*’s history as an abolitionist magazine and its contemporary image as “the ‘flagship’ of the political Left” provided her with a prestigious outlet for her work.⁶⁶⁸ Two of her essays published in September 2013 illuminated her concern with how race and gender were represented in literary culture. Addressing how “all literary communities” should be closely examined regarding issues of diversity, Gay critiqued the cliché of quality over quantity statements often used to combat true diversity. She argued that diversity and “mediocrity” did not go hand in

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁸ “About *The Nation*,” *The Nation*, 2017, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/about-us-and-contact/>.

hand.⁶⁶⁹ Ultimately, Gay concluded that fiction was a tool no one had mastered, but she believed opening it up to diversity at the creative and structural levels would create “better writers by trying.”⁶⁷⁰ The fight for diversity had been embedded in Gay’s authorial identity since her emergence within literary culture, and she crafted the essay to reach the progressive audience of *The Nation*. By highlighting that literary culture as a whole maintained a lack of diversity, she contended that writers needed to address their own shortcomings before attempting to alter the system.

She struggles with the realization of one’s own role and how it is performed within literary culture in much of her print nonfiction. Categories limit writers’ abilities to reach certain audiences and gain prominence. In “Urgent, Unheard Stories,” she tackled literary diversity again, except this time she filtered it more through her intersectional identity. She recounted a question she received from a woman after a reading. The woman asked Gay about her feelings on being “label[ed a] ‘black woman writer.’”⁶⁷¹ Gay admitted she was “fine with that label;” however, she described how “women writers and writers of color don’t really have the luxury of being known simply as writers.”⁶⁷² This reflected Gay’s continual struggle with the limitations placed upon authors of difference. Literary culture’s tradition of separating authors based upon race, gender, and other socially constructed identities made her embrace her difference, while also pushing back on these categories to bring to light the ludicrousness behind them. Gay asked,

⁶⁶⁹ Gay, “Rising Above the Failure of Imagination,” *The Nation*, September 10, 2013, accessed August 28, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/rising-above-failure-imagination/>.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ Gay, “Urgent, Unheard Stories,” *The Nation*, September 24, 2013, accessed August 28, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/urgent-unheard-stories/>.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

“What the hell is a ‘writer of color,’ anyway?” She answered this conundrum by describing how “a writer’s identity” did not affect her reading of literature; she was more engaged with the “beautiful arrangements of words and ideas.” These values are a romantic interpretation of literature. Real literature superseded attempts at categorization because it was created to be aesthetically pleasing.

Indeed, authorship remains bound to print publication, regardless of social restrictions, and Gay achieved the true author status with the publication of *An Untamed State* and *Bad Feminist*. These two books granted her entry into more prestigious areas of literary culture, yet still maintained the foundational traits she developed in digital media. Both books draw on the themes she expressed in many of her digital presences, but it was the cultural validation by mainstream publishers and literary figures that altered her image.

An Untamed State and *Bad Feminist* were published within two months of each other—May and August 2014. The almost simultaneous publication set Gay up as an author who was able to create both an engaging story and sharp, intelligent cultural criticism. The different genres allowed her to be marketed across literary culture. The blurbs provided with *An Untamed State* cast Gay as a feminist author capable of rendering literature that mattered. Renowned Haitian-American author and feminist Edwidge Danticat provided the most prominent blurb. In it, she praised Gay’s book as an engrossing “novel of hope intermingled with fear.”⁶⁷³ The blurb did not directly comment on Gay as an author, but Danticat’s language implied Gay’s talent. At the same time, the use of Danticat to blurb the book was a strategic marketing ploy by Grove. Gay wrote on her Tumblr on September 25, 2013, “Oh, and this one time, Edwidge Danticat (!!!)

⁶⁷³ Gay, *An Untamed State* (New York: Black Cat, 2014).

blurbed my novel.”⁶⁷⁴ She prefaced this exclamation by thanking the other mediators, such as *Time*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New York Times Book Review*, who praised the novel, but her comment showed her respect and admiration for Danticat as an author. By having Danticat’s blurb, Gay was categorized with her as another notable Haitian-American author and feminist, thus courting a similar audience.

This marketing continued with the blurbs appearing on *Bad Feminist*. Instead of declarations from her peers, Harper Perennial, which Gay called “a behemoth,” used blurbs from publications.⁶⁷⁵ These not only trumpeted the collection as an important work of cultural criticism, they also legitimized Gay’s authorship. The *Boston Globe* proclaimed Gay “[a]n important and pioneering contemporary writer,” while *Salon* considered her and the collection to be “[t]railblazing.”⁶⁷⁶ The prestige attached to these publications endorsed Gay. While these publications provided cultural capital, the popular magazine *People* provided a blurb that played on female stereotypes: “Roxane Gay is the brilliant girl-next-door: your best friend and your sharpest critic.”⁶⁷⁷ *People*’s blurb made her relatable to their general audience, and through this, she lost some of the clout she had received via the other blurbs. The range of publications Harper Perennial included placed Gay within the literary world; she was at the same time a necessary

⁶⁷⁴ Gay (roxanegay), “No Need to Make This Undeservedly Fancy,” Tumblr, September 25, 2013, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/62290641362/no-need-to-make-this-undeservedly-fancy>.

⁶⁷⁵ Gay, “Two Damn Books: How I Got Here and Where I Want to Go,” *Buzzfeed*, May 27, 2014, accessed September 25, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/roxanegay/two-damn-books?utm_term=.qqVnnnmVz5#.udGAAAnZoq.

⁶⁷⁶ Gay, *Bad Feminist* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014).

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

new voice in American nonfiction and a down-to-earth companion. These dual roles mirrored her enactment of her authorial identity by showcasing her authenticity and intellectual authority.

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of Gay's print presences, especially with the publication of *Bad Feminist*, was the remediation of her digital writings. In the Acknowledgments, Gay wrote that all of the essays had been published previously in other forms. The majority of the publications she listed were digital only, like *Buzzfeed*, *Jezebel*, *Bookslut*, and *The Rumpus*.⁶⁷⁸ Her intentional remediation illustrated the attraction print media still had for emerging authors. Although her authorial identity began and gained attention through her digital presences, the remediation of these same online appearances into print allowed them to be considered within the traditional framework of literature.

Leading up to and after the publication of *Bad Feminist*, Gay appeared in numerous publications to promote the book. These appearances, unlike her promotion for *Ayiti* and *An Untamed State*, took place in top tier publications. It was during these performances that Gay described her views on publishing her works. In an interview with the New York City based arts magazine, *The L Magazine*, she declared that Twitter allowed her "to brainstorm" ideas for essays.⁶⁷⁹ Gay recanted on this idea in *The New York Times Magazine* a few days later by stating she did not have a "strategy" when using social media. She claimed, "I don't ever want to be the

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 219. The themes of the essays published in *Bad Feminist* reinforce the same authorial traits I explored during the digital and audio/visual sections of this chapter. Instead of restating Gay's already established intersectional identity here, I have chosen to take a closer look at how Gay views digital and print publishing through her appearances in other print publications, which justify her choices in printing these essays.

⁶⁷⁹ Margaret Eby, "A Bad Feminist Takes Over," *The L Magazine*, July 16, 2014, accessed September 25, 2017, <http://www.thelmagazine.com/2014/07/a-bad-feminist-takes-over/>.

kind of person who uses the phrase ‘social media strategy.’”⁶⁸⁰ On the contrary, her lack of “social media strategy” was a strategy, and her admission to using Twitter and her other accounts to exchange ideas and test out writing material revealed that she placed them firmly within her writing process. Similarly, she told Nolan Feeney in *Time* that she viewed her digital writing, especially her social media writing, as a “first draft” for her print essays:

I find that because I start on Tumblr with no mission, the writing is often more interesting and stronger because I’m not sitting there with a deadline. I’m just writing for myself, so that’s where I do my most open and honest writing. The Internet works well because it’s so responsive and so immediate. I have some thoughts and I put them out there. When I do it on my personal blog, there’s nothing at stake. It’s just my blog, and as far as I’m concerned, no one’s reading it. So that really helps reduce the anxiety. I don’t feel a lot of anxiety about my writing, but definitely messing around on Twitter or writing on my Tumblr is just where I’m starting to work through things and figure out what I’m thinking or feeling.⁶⁸¹

Gay’s statement highlighted her approach, while also becoming mired in some of the stereotypes surrounding the digital. The immediacy and interactivity built into digital media provided her with a workshop for her ideas, but her statements about the Internet as a space for communication between author and audience clashed with how she interpreted it as a space for “open and honest writing.” There was a sense she treated her social media writing like a notebook instead of a place for refined publication.

Her choice to remediate her digital essays and the appearances she made in print during the promotion of *Bad Feminist* reinforced the dominance of print over digital writing, highlighting her desire to use it to achieve authorial prominence. Gay told Jessica Gross that she did not realize the power and “reach” books still had in contemporary culture until *An Untamed*

⁶⁸⁰ Jessica Gross, “Roxane Gay’s ‘Bad’ Feminism,” *The New York Times Magazine*, July 25, 2014, accessed August 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/magazine/roxane-gays-bad-feminism.html>.

⁶⁸¹ Feeney.

State had been published.⁶⁸² She described how “habits” typically controlled our Internet reading and that this actually limited the audience; this was different than her earlier comment about readership numbers that appeared in *HTMLGiant*. Likewise, Gay revealed in *Bust*, a women’s lifestyle magazine, that “hitting the *New York Times* Best Seller List” with *Bad Feminist* would “help gain visibility” for the book but more importantly for her as an author.⁶⁸³ She valued being a *New York Times* bestselling author and the cultural prestige attached to it. Her humility and the prevailing idea that authors did not matter in U.S. culture were underscored by the “CRAZY” coverage *Bad Feminist* received.⁶⁸⁴ This rise in recognition led Gay and others to cast her as a success story. According to Cochrane, “Her [Gay’s] success is unexpected and delicious—and not only because we rarely see a woman in her late 30s, based in a tiny Midwestern town, hailed as the hot new literary darling.”⁶⁸⁵ She did not fit the traditional images of authorship, and her gender and age disrupted society’s youth-oriented obsession. These factors intersected with Gay’s reliance on print and the entrenched value it held in the literary world to generate her literary celebrity.

Gay viewed print as a way to solidify one’s reputation. Her frustration with authors who attempted to pull their work from web journals seems to have given way. In *The Great Discontent*, she explained that writing for print and digital media carried different intentions for

⁶⁸² Gross, “Roxane Gay’s ‘Bad’ Feminism.”

⁶⁸³ Jessie Askinazi, “Interview with a Bad Feminist: Roxane Gay,” *Bust*, August 20, 2014, accessed August 29, 2017, <http://bust.com/feminism/12874-interview-with-a-bad-feminist-roxane-gay.html>.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁵ Kira Cochrane, “Roxane Gay: Meet the Bad Feminist,” *The Guardian*, August 2, 2014, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/02/roxane-gay-bad-feminist-sisterhood-fake-orgasm>.

the author and the reader: “It’s one thing to have my writing on the Internet here and there because websites come and go. We like to say that the Internet is forever, but it’s not as forever as we would like to believe. A book is permanent: it is potentially in many more hands, and it’s open to criticism in a way that it isn’t on the Internet because I don’t have to read the comments. I tend to read the reviews because they are done by real critics taking a real engagement with the work.”⁶⁸⁶ The key theme she developed here was permanency and authority. It can be assumed Gay knows books are not perpetual objects, but her statement shows that the persistent idea of the lasting power of books over the digital affects how authors engage with publication media. At the same time, she finds print to represent authority and authenticity. Stating “real critics” write for print reveals the lasting attachment the medium has with credibility, no matter how much that idea has been challenged over the years. Unlike some authors, she followed the reviews of her work, and her statement hinted toward respect for the professional print critic over the possibly amateur digital critic. Although she championed digital writing across multiple media, Gay distanced herself from it through her language in print publications. Perhaps, it is to perform for the audience and publication, and perhaps, it is a move to alter her representation with the success of *Bad Feminist*. Either way, Gay’s replication of the indefatigable idea around the permanence and authority of print sheds light on her choice to collect and publish her online essays.

Also, around the promotion of *Bad Feminist* and up through the publication of her memoir *Hunger*, Gay used top tier publications to further establish her identity as an intersectional author. These appearances allowed her to perform for a larger, more mainstream audience. At the same time, she attempted to keep her place within a smaller literary community

⁶⁸⁶ Essmaker.

through her performances in independent publications, which catered to more intellectual and artistic audiences. In 2014, she was interviewed by the art magazine *BOMB*. During this interview, she reinforced the foundational traits of her authorship, but she faced pressure from the interviewer, John Freeman, regarding her classification as “an outsider.”⁶⁸⁷ Freeman pushed back on Gay because of her privileged background. She agreed that her education and upper-middle-class upbringing distanced her from being a traditional outsider; however, she told Freeman that her outsider feeling had existed all her life. In this respect, Gay claimed, “Perception and reality blur in this regard.”⁶⁸⁸ Gay, up to this point, had performed her identity as an intersectional author against the traditional literary culture. The success of *Bad Feminist* changed all of this because the popularity of the book caused her to become a highly recognizable figure. This feature combined with her life and education disrupted her constructed identity as a literary outsider, but she attempted to highlight the ways representation dominated social identities by showing that a person’s internal feelings held a prominent position in how one performed.

She expanded on this by supplying insight into the role of the Black writer/public intellectual in other print appearances. She admitted to Essmaker, “I hope that I will have changed people’s minds in ways that make the world a better place. I want my writing to do something more than just satisfy my love of writing. I want it to reach people.”⁶⁸⁹ The desire for a literary legacy that transcends the author’s life reveals Gay’s Romantic view of authorship.

⁶⁸⁷ John Freeman, “Roxane Gay,” *BOMB* 128 (Summer 2014), accessed August 29, 2017, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/10067/roxane-gay>.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

Through the reception of her works and her authorship, she can, in some small ways, alter the representations of writers of difference in the literary world.

In the prestigious literary magazine *Virginia Quarterly Review* (VQR), Gay juxtaposed her acceptance with the tensions she felt as a Black woman writer toward the socio-cultural expectations placed upon her and other prominent writers of difference. The desire to be great filled her with a drive to achieve significant recognition, and it combined with Gay's humility to produce an ambivalence toward her growing success.⁶⁹⁰ She discussed how *all* writers feel a constant desire to achieve the status of author, and that no matter the level of public attention, there was a yearning for more fame. Her humility distanced her from totally embracing the "moment" she was having, and the repetition of "*May I be worthy*" with slight variations throughout the essay provided a glimpse at the expectations placed upon "exceptional."⁶⁹¹

Gay's performance of the author as intersectional placed her firmly within multiple sites of conflict, and this conflict disrupted her ability to relish her achievements. She never felt fulfilled with her success: "I have achieved a modicum of success, but I never stop working. I never stop. I don't even feel the flush of pleasure I once did when I achieve a new milestone. I am having a moment, but I only want more. I need more. I cannot merely be good enough because I am chased by the pernicious whispers that I might only be 'good enough for a black

⁶⁹⁰ Gay, "The Price of Black Ambition," *VQR* 90, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 54, accessed August 29, 2017, *Project MUSE*, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/558182>. Gay expressed her desire to achieve success within literary culture numerous times. See Roxane Gay, "Security: Roxane Gay in Conversation with Manjula Martin," *Scratch: Writers, Money, and the Art of Making a Living* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017): 173. In this part of the interview, Gay showed the power literary awards, such as the Pulitzer Prize, had on authors. See also, Brad Listi, "Episode 448—Roxane Gay," *OtherPPL* podcast, 1:11:42, January 11, 2017. Toward the end of the interview, Gay admitted that print publications like *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review* were where she desired to have her fiction or essays appear one day. She claimed, "I just really admire those publications a great deal."

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 56-58.

woman.”⁶⁹² She contended that “certain infrastructures, so profoundly shaped by racial inequality,” affected how she performed. These historical limitations continued to trouble her, causing her to seek ways to dismantle them by being “four times as good” as other authors.⁶⁹³ As she had established previously, her authorship became a way to push back on the traditional limitations placed upon marginalized writers and present her authorial identity as professional but at the same time romantically constructed.

The ways Gay performs her authorial identity in print reinforce the traits she enacts across her other media presences. Her intersectional authorship becomes more pronounced with the success of her remediated essays in *Bad Feminist* and by being labeled “Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Bad Feminist*” on the cover of *Hunger*. Literary celebrity and cultural recognition complicate how she approaches her appearances, but this newfound attention also creates a desire for her as a cultural icon and demands her to enact her authorship along expected lines. That said, Gay’s performance of the author as intersectional naturally fights against the restrictions placed upon authors in the literary world by using print, the medium of choice for literary culture, to illuminate that she and other writers of difference should be more than just politicized individuals.

Authoring the Intersections

As the two selfies in figure seven show, Roxane Gay has become more than just a serious author. She transcends the limitations placed upon writers because of their gender, race,

⁶⁹² Ibid., 59.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., 58.

sexuality, and other socially constructed identities to achieve respect and adoration in mainstream culture. Her selfie with Michelle Obama took place after a one-on-one interview at Inbound 2017.⁶⁹⁴ Gay's nervousness is clearly visible, which betrays her respect and admiration for Obama. This is contrasted with her enjoyment and devious smile when capturing a meeting with actor Channing Tatum.⁶⁹⁵ Her desire for Tatum is no secret: she has written about him on Tumblr, tweets about him, and calls him "the most perfect man in the world."⁶⁹⁶ These selfies, posted on Twitter, indicate a level of success that has allowed her to meet people she only dreamed about.



Fig. 5: Selfies with former U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama and actor Channing Tatum, Roxane Gay, photographer, from Roxane Gay (@rgay), "Hi," Twitter, September 27, 2017, 10:05 a.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/913041902928384002>, and "Hi.," Twitter, October 11, 2017, 6:19 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/918239642029191168>.

⁶⁹⁴ See figure 5, left image, photographer, from Roxane Gay (@rgay), "Hi," Twitter, September 27, 2017, 10:05 a.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/913041902928384002>. See also Erica Gonzalez, "Michelle Obama Doesn't Miss Being in the White House," *Harper's Bazaar*, September 27, 2017.

⁶⁹⁵ See figure 5, right image, "Hi.," Twitter, October 11, 2017, 6:19 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/918239642029191168>.

⁶⁹⁶ Gay, "I Wanted to Hug Every Part of Him With My Mouth: A Magic Mike XXL Recap," *The Toast*, July 1, 2015, accessed November 20, 2017, <http://the-toast.net/2015/07/01/magic-mike-xxl-recap/>.

Gay's performance of the author as intersectional spans multiple media channels, allowing her to craft a consistent representation of her public image. Realizing early on who she was as a writer shaped how she performed publicly.⁶⁹⁷ By placing herself firmly within the digital early in her career, she was able to cultivate a passionate and sympathetic audience that saw her literary art and authorial identity as a source of inspiration and solace. The fight for equality and diversity marks her performance of authorship, and as her literary celebrity has grown with the success of her nonfiction books, her identity as an intersectional author has become more prominent.

This identity is a conscious performance. It incorporates Gay's identities as a woman, a Black woman, a writer, a writer of difference, and a feminist. These multiple identities intersect with literary and popular culture, as well as with media and technology. Each of these identities are politicized through her performances, and she is conscious of how her identity as an author is a tool to fight against restrictive traditions from within the literary world.⁶⁹⁸

It is not possible to know how or why she became hugely successful, not even she can fully grasp this phenomenon. A tweet from Gay on October 6, 2016 showed the shock and flattery that this new identity caused her: "Guys. A woman just told me I am her Beyoncé and that she told her husband I am on her celebrity exception list. Guys!!!!!!!!!"⁶⁹⁹ This claim illustrates the fervent fandom her authorship creates and the way her art and persona have moved

⁶⁹⁷ Essmaker.

⁶⁹⁸ See Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014): 14. See also Roxane Gay, "The Full Text of 'Bad Feminist' Author Roxane Gay's WI12 Speech," *Publisher's Weekly*, January 31, 2017, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/72649-the-full-text-of-bad-feminist-author-roxane-gay-s-wi12-speech.html>.

⁶⁹⁹ Gay (@rgay), Twitter, October 6, 2016, 9:34 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/784205187237998593>.

into the mainstream. Indeed, Gay's move from digital author to *New York Times* bestselling author and media darling is jarring considering that much of U.S. celebrity culture does not recognize figures like her. The success of her performance of the author as intersectional proves that something is working, yet until more writers of difference are accepted and validated, the fight continues. Roxane Gay knows this, and she uses her role as a literary celebrity to create space for a variety of voices and stories.

Coda

The Author's Conflict in the Digital Age

Foucault's famous question, "What difference does it make who is speaking," has not come to fruition in the digital age because the figure of the author still matters.⁷⁰⁰ Literary culture weathered the Postmodern storm that displaced the author only to emerge to a changed landscape. This landscape is not the primarily print based one of literary history; it is a diverse media environment alive with new, more enticing media to foster and problematize authorship. Writers no longer have to rely on print publishing to disseminate their works to adoring audiences. Digital media give new writers the tools to circumvent tradition in crafting their authorial identities and art. The web, however, does not consecrate a writer as an author. That act remains firmly under the control of print.

As more and more authors are born digital, beginning their careers writing on sites such as Twitter, Tumblr, and online-only magazines, the literary world will have to catch up and accept this form of authorship. The strides made by these forbearers will add another element to literary history. These digital authors could alter our understanding of what a literary text is and how it reaches and affects readers/viewers. The incorporation of audio/visual elements into the literary text promotes a redefinition of the novel, short story, poem, or essay, making the medium specificity of traditional literature a relic of the past. Even though there have been writers to emerge from the digital to become recognized as esteemed authors, the fact that these presences do not hold the same cultural prestige, in a Bourdieuvian sense, as print presences is significant.

⁷⁰⁰ Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 120.

This reveals the embeddedness of print in the beliefs of what it means to be an author; writers cannot escape them to establish new interpretations of authorship in the digital age.

I began this project with two simple questions: How do writers present themselves as authors, and what do these representations reveal about the media used in literary culture? To search for answers, I decided to focus on nonfiction and the paratexts surrounding authors' major works to give me, perhaps, a clearer view of the emerging identities. I uncovered some significant overlaps in how my group of writers acted across multiple media channels. The choice to begin with two prestigious authors—Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace—allowed me to trace a more traditional arc of authorial identity performance. These two men represent the lasting effects of nineteenth-century traditions of authorship. The complement each other; both express deep concern for their image while casting themselves beyond such vanity. The use of print as their primary means of literary production reveal their debt to prevailing conceptions of authorship. Franzen and Wallace's criticism of audio/visual and digital media make them traditionalists, even though act like literary rebels. They feign little to no knowledge of their intentions because this would destroy the aura of their authorship. These two authors reveal that although writers desire to be considered beyond the pulls of tradition and literary celebrity, the effects are deeply ingrained in how writers perform authorship across media.

Natural extensions from Franzen and Wallace are the two other authors in my study—Tao Lin and Roxane Gay. Unlike Franzen and Wallace, Lin and Gay emerge from the digital, choosing to develop their roles within literary culture through ubiquitous online presences. Digital media allow them the opportunities to generate underground buzz around their authorial identities and literary works. This attention, eventually, leads to appearances in mainstream publications and with mainstream book publishers. Regardless of their frequent use of digital

media throughout their career, Lin and Gay are not drastically different from Franzen and Wallace. They cast themselves as serious authors who are conscious of the performative nature of authorship. Through their conscious performances, they initiate the spread of their images throughout all media. Their break from the traditional means of production does not diminish the allure of Romantic authorship and the pull of print validation. For Lin and Gay, print legitimizes their authorial identities, even though they establish them in the digital. This legitimization reveals how they obscure the effects of literary tradition within their authorial performances, while at the same time, subtly acknowledging their possession of them. As digitally born authors, Lin and Gay represent a new wave of writers entering the literary scene, but besides for this facet of their authorial identities, their performances do not stray far from the traditions still dominating conceptions of authorship.

As I have shown through these four examples, authorship in literary culture is steeped in both tradition and rebellion. The types of authorial identities Franzen, Wallace, Lin, and Gay perform are not the only ones present in the literary world, but they are four of the more prominent versions of serious authorship. Unlike popular authors, such as Stephen King, James Patterson, Danielle Steele, and J.K. Rowling, the authors I analyze in my project represent a more artistic side of cultural production. They are members of a particularly American variety of, what Bourdieu calls, the field of restricted production. Although they position themselves as authors more aligned with high culture, Franzen, Wallace, Lin, and Gay become enmeshed in another central conflict of authorship in the digital age, that of literary celebrity. Their ability to crossover into mainstream readership proves that Lahire's question regarding the movement of authors across "different sectors of the [literary] universe" is possible.⁷⁰¹ It becomes even more

⁷⁰¹ Lahire, 445.

possible with the use of multiple media. Appearing across print, audio/visual, and digital media, whether consciously in the cases of Lin and Gay or reluctantly in the cases of Franzen and Wallace, brands these writers as specific types of authors, allowing them to converge their identities into a consistent product, while publishers and other mediators promote a prevailing image of them to prospective audiences. Dissemination of these representations, especially visual images, establishes an aura around the authors that produces interest from wider segments of the public. This, in turn, allows them to reach levels of literary celebrity that would have been more difficult in the current media environment without the savvy use of multiple media for their performances.

Adding to this is the conflict these authors feel when obtaining recognition. The effects of Romantic disinterestedness and the negative connotations of celebrity status cause Franzen, Wallace, Gay, and, to an extent, Lin to experience feelings of insignificance. The more indebted the authorial identity is to literary tradition, the more the author views literary celebrity negatively, as in the cases of Franzen and Wallace. However, all four authors strive to achieve some level of public notice. With the strategic use of tradition within their media appearances, they decry literary celebrity as further proof of the commodification of authorship in the marketplace, but with their desires to be recognized as significant, serious authors they achieve a Romantic version of celebrity regardless of their performative acts.

Authorship is a social performance that encompasses the use of multiple media channels. Writers, along with other mediators, construct these performances to create a place for themselves in the literary world. This is significant because as they gain recognition their authorial identities conform to the persistent traditions of authorship. As with most types of cultural production, establishing a brand early on provides the writer with the ability to leverage

her or his authorial identity against peers and forbearers, ultimately generating attention from the literary establishment. This takes place not only in the culture's standard media, but also in the emerging platforms of the digital. With this adoption of digital media, authors circumvent other cultural actors and directly affect their images in the literary community through a savvy manipulation of social media and other new media platforms. The fact that this is more direct than in previous eras means that the role of the author is shifting. No longer can authors claim Romantic disinterest in their images across media other than print; in fact, this was suspect even before the emergence of digital communication technology. Contemporary authors must use all available media to perform their authorial identities as continuations of tradition, while at the same time pushing the boundaries of how we, as members of the literary world, imagine the author. The performance of authorial identity thus becomes a significant part of interpreting prestige and technology throughout literary history.

My project's significance lies in its ability to locate and express aspects of tradition within the contemporary media environment of the literary world. Through combining persona studies, performance studies, and authorship theories, I add to the critical conversation around not only authors and their works, but the emerging field of celebrity both within literary studies and the broader context of persona studies. By showing that authors are engaged with a continual cycle of crafting, disseminating, and maintaining their identities, the connection between these so-called high culture figures and middlebrow and low culture celebrities is not as sharply defined as once thought. Authors, like Franzen, Wallace, Lin, and Gay, shed light on how authorial identities are analogous to their literary works. Authors become not only the personae behind the works but also the social actors constructed through their and other mediators' actions. This feature of authorship in the digital age is nascent, but I believe it is a central area of

study for future research. Developing out of this will be a deeper interest in the use of fashion as a way for authors to perform their identities while maintaining cultural distance from this visual medium as a possible stand-alone article or presentation.⁷⁰² This project only touches on the depth of persona and performance studies applications toward authorship and literature.

As I briefly noted in Chapter Four, the public intellectual, but especially the Black male public intellectual, is another social identity that has shifted in the digital age. Gay serves as a hybrid figure because she views herself as a fiction writer first and foremost, but mainstream culture has made her into a public intellectual. Male figures, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Van Jones, and others are ever present on multiple media channels as “experts.” Does their continued parading on television programs and other mainstream entertainment diminish their contributions to society and culture, and does this have a historical antecedent in the U.S.? How does social media and other digital platforms complicate their identity performances as authorities? How does race and gender affect their identities and self-presentations? I foresee my work heading in this direction in relation to the conclusions found in this project because the performance of identity is not located in only one area of culture.

Through a deeper analysis of the digital age’s ways to network oneself as a public figure, we can gain a clearer understanding of the historical features that persist in shaping authorship, celebrity, and media. It is a complicated area because authorship has been pronounced dead, but this is not the case. Authors are alive and well; their roles have just changed. The days of authors hiding behind their work are gone. Now, the author must be hyper-visible to cut through the dearth of information, entertainment options, and personae available to audiences, and this involves a conscious, consistent, and believable performance across not just print but all media.

⁷⁰² This is already beginning to occur, especially with the publication of Terry Newman’s *Literary Authors and the Clothes They Wore* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017).

We can see this in how famous recluses like Cormac McCarthy have been forced into public light recently. Opening literary culture, and other forms of artistic culture, up to grant prestige to digitally born authors and texts can create more nuanced identities and products, not just the ones steeped in tradition. There will be issues because it is not a fixed area, and it will involve a firm interdisciplinary approach. Nevertheless, it will be rewarding because understanding the ways writers act as authors can illuminate how we are still mired in the past even though we surge toward the future.

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Appendix

Terminology

Author: the character represented across media. The author is a culmination of personality traits, physical traits, and artistic/aesthetic traits of the writer. These traits work together to form an image in media—print, audio/visual, and digital. Audiences and other cultural/media figures support or disrupt the presentations of the author within literary culture through their participation in the creation and dissemination process. This character should not be confused with the living person because the author exists only as a media and cultural creation accessible through publication.

Authorship and Authorial Identity: the distinguishing features of an author visible through her/his mediated appearances. Authorship and authorial identity are made up of the identity and aesthetic traits that are present within the author's character. Audiences use these traits to construct images of the author as a cultural figure.

Independent, small press publisher: a publishing house that operates outside of mainstream literary culture. These publishers, such as Melville House and Grove Atlantic, seek out emerging writers and literary texts that are experimental. They publish literary fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and other genres of literature. These publishers have limited budgets for promotion. Although economic profits are necessary, these types of publishers focus on developing and fostering talent as opposed to the marketing of established personalities.

Literary Celebrity: a specific form of fame and cultural recognition typically associated with literature's place in higher levels of cultural production. Literary celebrity operates within U.S. celebrity culture, but it does not carry the same levels of cultural recognition and economic remuneration as other celebrities. Historically, literary celebrity is one of the first forms of mass/popular celebrity culture. Literary celebrity aspires for a mixture of popular success/attention and lasting prestige/canonization, which produces conflicts within literary culture about the cultural roles of authors. However, many contemporary writers seek to attain some levels of literary celebrity even though position themselves against it.

Literary Culture: a portion of U.S. artistic and entertainment culture that serves to consecrate and recognize writers, texts, and publications as important. Literary culture grounds itself in the long history of literature as a form of artistic expression, but also as one of the first forms of mass entertainment. Literary culture operates a form of high culture in many areas of U.S. society. As a form of high culture, literary culture seeks to maintain a distance from popular forms of culture, such as film, television, music, and fashion, as well as popular forms of literature like crime, mystery, horror, and romance fiction. Gatekeepers police what is included and recognized as literary culture by enforcing definitions of authorship and literature. This policing often

excludes authors who fall into the following categories: experimental/avant-garde, women, people of color, and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual. Although progress has been made in recent years to open up the confines of literary culture to include periphery writers and texts, many contemporary writers believe that more can be done to diversify literary culture in the U.S.

Mainstream, large-scale publisher: a publishing house that holds large amounts of economic and cultural capital. These publishers, such as Penguin/Random House, Little Brown & Company, HarperCollins, and Macmillan, publish both literary and popular fiction as well a large selection of nonfiction. These publishers own smaller presses and use them to distribute authors and works that may not be as economically viable for mass/popular audiences as established “celebrity” authors.

Media: a catchall term for the distributors of cultural products and the technologies associated with them. The Media has become popularly associated with journalism and the companies/publications that provide these services. In the scope of this project, media entails the specific forms of communication media available in the U.S.—print, audio/visual, and digital/online/Internet. The singular form, medium, will be used to refer to a specific use of an individual media by a cultural producer (ex: The author uses print as a medium to...), while media will be used to refer to the media as a whole and how it grants certain abilities to the user (ex: Print media allows authors to...).

Performance: the socio-cultural actions of a media/cultural figure that reveal her/his identity traits. Performances occur in public situations and are accessible via media technologies—books/newspapers/magazines (print), film/television/radio (audio/visual), and social media/web-videos/websites (digital). Audiences gather information about a media/cultural figure through her/his appearances in media, and this information is used to build images of the figure that serve as cultural identifiers. Performances are influenced by many factors, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, history, and other socio-cultural discourses. Many performances take place as solo exhibitions, but more often performances occur as ensembles of cultural actors in the media environment. These ensemble performances allow one cultural figure to play off of the other cultural figure, either supporting or rejecting the dominant cultural representations produced from previous performances.

Popular Author: a writer who achieves a large mass audience and wealth from her/his books. Popular authors are, typically, associated with the genres of crime, mystery, romance, and horror. These authors produce multiple works within a short time span, essentially flooding the market. They appear consistently on bestseller lists, and their works are adapted for film and television on a regular basis. Although they are part of literary culture, popular authors do not carry the levels of cultural capital like serious authors. Popular authors works are oftentimes viewed as formulaic and derivative, which devalues their artistry. However, their lack of cultural capital within literary culture is exchanged for large amounts of economic capital.

Popular Culture: a form of U.S. culture that seeks to appeal to a diverse mass audience. Popular culture includes certain genres of literature, as well as many television shows, films, music, and sports. Newspapers, many magazines, and certain websites can be grouped under popular culture based on their appeals to large audiences. Many cultural critics view popular culture as lower

than other forms of artistic culture; however, popular culture has become a valued part of contemporary academic study.

Serious Author: a writer who strives to be represented as a member of high-literary culture. This type of writer is often referred to as a literary author both in literary culture and popular culture to differentiate between higher, more culturally respected forms of authorship and more popular genre writers. Writers who aspire to be considered serious authors attempt to construct and perform identities where aesthetics and literature as an art form are dominant traits. For these types of writers, literature's role in U.S. culture is a primary fascination, and they attempt to promote cultural capital over economic capital. Cultural critics and the academy, many times, embrace serious authors. Through being recognized by high-literary cultural figures, serious authors define the fields of literature and authorship across their media presences. These writers seek to avoid being seen as popular or mass authors because they view these as minor forms of authorship.

Writer: the living person who creates, not only literary texts but also a majority of the author's character. The writer is separate from the author because she/he exists outside public media. There are facets of the writer and her/his life, thoughts, and ideologies that are not presented to audiences through media channels.