Metonymic Modes of Identity in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children and David Foster Wallace's "The Suffering Channel": A Metonymic Nose to Sniff out the Empathetic Shit

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by

ANDY FENTEM

Under the Direction of Renee Schatteman (PhD) and Chris Kocela (PhD)

ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Salman Rushdie and David Foster Wallace attempt to incorporate empathy throughout their fiction in order to induce empathy in their audiences, particularly in Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* and Wallace’s short story “The Suffering Channel.” While both authors incorporate similar techniques respective of their conceptual styles (i.e. postcolonial, postmodern, post-postmodern styles), the defining characteristic between them is metonymy. By establishing the metonymical characteristics of empathy in contrast to the metaphorical characteristics of sympathy, I also explore the metonymic disconnections between Rushdie and Wallace in terms of metaphor, mimesis, and metafiction.
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DEDICATION

Like Saleem Sinai, my story began sometime before I was born – as does any life. A woman whose name I do not know conceived a child by a man whose name I also do not know. These are my biological parents, strangers to me then as they are now. A few months after these strangers met, my biological mother began searching for couples she felt were adequate to raise her child, people who embodied her ideals of what parents might and should be. She chose my parents, Don and Dru Fentem, who had a three year-old girl named Michael Anne.

I was born on May 5th, 1984, a month named for spring time and fertility, a day celebrated in Mexico for the resistance of French troops in 1862, and a year used as the title of one of George Orwell’s greatest works. The place was Aurora, Colorado, but I was not there long – only three weeks – before Don and Dru flew Southwest Airlines to pick me up and take me home to Oklahoma. It was then that I was given my name, Donald Andrew - a name of the utmost ironic play-on-wording and cutesy-tootsie toying of my identity. Say it aloud: "Donald-and-Dru."

I am told I lived with foster parents while in Colorado, that no information was given about my birth father, and that my eyes were opened before my parents ever saw me. The rest, as they say, is history.

Granted, I do not think I would have the faculty to identify with such characters like Saleem, whose identities are also paradoxical, created and grown in what is and simultaneously is not, without the decisions of those who have come before me, my parents (and not parents), and my family (and not family).

It is to them that I dedicate this thesis with what is perhaps the greatest paradox of all – love.
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I must thank and accredit Dr. Theresa Thompson at Valdosta State University for introducing my good friends and I to Salman Rushdie’s writing in a Study of Major Authors course. By extension, my good friends, specifically Shane Wilson and AJ Brantly, are two people who have continued to encourage a steady interest in Rushdie and many of these ideas. Shane, for instance, wrote his MA thesis on Rushdie; AJ, for another instance, wrote his on David Foster Wallace. Also at VSU, Dr. Chere Peguesse was subject to hearing me spout off about Rushdie without having much of a grasp on what exactly it was I was trying to say, but also the unfortunate harbinger to a seemingly silly connection with shit. There is certainly a strange, narrative sense of foreshadowing in all of these things that are quite honestly coincidental.

My former AP US History teacher and now close friend, Ian Crawley, provided untold amounts of encouragement throughout my collegiate career and on. In like manner, Dr. Luke Vassiliou’s explicitness about my writing and pronouncement of my potential as a thinker eventually encouraged me to take on a focus in English literature, a decision that would not have brought me to this accomplishment without his expertise.

While attending Georgia State University, I have met many amazing and intelligent people who have put great winds in my sails. Stephanie and Todd Rountree, Mary Katherine Mason Ramsey, Owen Cantrell, Katie Harrison, Lelania Watkins, Drew Wright, Jennifer Olive, Deborah D’Cruz, Mary Grace Eliot, Joe and Kippie Flanders, and probably more I’m forgetting are all people who have stuck with me through this long journey. Dr. Leanne Richardson, Dr. Paul Schmidt, Dr. Calvin Thomas, Dr. Ian Almond, Dr. Mark Noble, Dr. Tanya Caldwell, Dr.
Angela Hall-Godsey, and Dr. Melinda Snow are all GSU professors who have interacted with me in some positive way throughout this project as well.

My family is spread far and wide, but have all made some attempt to keep up with this project as it’s moved along. My parents, Don and Dru Fentem, along with my siblings, Michael Anne, Cody, and Elizabeth, have been rooting for me since day one despite the geographical distance and the certain occurrence of tilted heads when explaining this thesis. I wouldn’t trade them for any other story.

Of course, none of this would have materialized without the guidance, support, and patience of my thesis committee, Dr. Renee Schatteman, Dr. Chris Kocela, and Dr. Randy Malamud. Their endurance, professionalism, criticism, and encouragement have propelled me to a level of thought and writing that is not only necessary, but also a representation of their skills as teachers, mentors, and instructors.
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INTRODUCTION

Salman Rushdie published his second novel, *Midnight’s Children* in 1980 and was awarded the Man Booker Prize in 1981. Twelve years later in 1993, the same novel was awarded The Booker of Bookers, establishing what may be Rushdie’s magnum opus, as well as the only novel to have ever won the prestigious award twice. However, Rushdie’s fame is clearly shrouded in notoriety stemming from the fatwa issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 over *The Satanic Verses* and accusations of blasphemying Mohammed, an event that became readily known as the “Rushdie affair.” Though the Ayatollah eventually changed his position on the matter, a large part of the conversation about Rushdie during and after the fatwa focused on the bounty hovering over his head. The Rushdie affair was certainly the most famous conversation revolving around Rushdie for some time during his decade long duck-and-cover, serving as a significant deterrent to academic criticism and Rushdie’s fiction. Nevertheless, Rushdie’s work has begun to receive more scholarly attention in recent years.

Rushdie is often compared to other postmodern and postcolonial writers of his time, a writer who adopts a frequently dense, fragmented style. He is not alone in using this style and can easily be compared to many other writers. Though it may seem unusual, Rushdie can be compared to David Foster Wallace with surprising relevance to contemporary American fiction and significance to Wallace’s conceptual style. Like Rushdie, Wallace is a writer whose fiction is regarded as dense and fragmented, signaling a unique style of his own. Furthermore, Wallace is often compared to other contemporary postmodern writers while also considered a critic of postmodernism. While Wallace never dealt with a fatwa as Rushdie did, scholarship on his fiction continues to increase. Further similarities between Rushdie and Wallace are found in their respective canons. Wallace published his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, in 1987. Much
like Rushdie’s first novel *Grimus*, it received relatively poor-to-fair reviews. However, Wallace’s second novel, *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996, continues to be an increasingly studied text. Unfortunately, these were Wallace’s only published novels before his suicide in 2008, after which *The Pale King* was published in 2011. Between these three novels, Wallace published a great many nonfiction and short stories, including nonfiction collections *Consider the Lobster* and *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, as well as the fiction collections *Girl with Curious Hair, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, and *Oblivion*. Most importantly, both of these writers share a unique characteristic in that their fiction advocates for a metonymic mode of identity. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Wallace’s “The Suffering Channel” incorporate paradox as a means of establishing metonymical connections with readers and, by extension, induce an empathetic connection that is by its nature metonymic.

To understand how metonymy bridges the critical gap between both authors’ fiction requires at least a brief discussion of their respective conceptual styles and then a more detailed close reading of their work. For the sake of this argument, I will be focusing specifically on Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and on Wallace’s short story “The Suffering Channel.” Both of these texts exemplify seemingly contradictory styles in that they speak to their critical contexts and beyond those contexts. Rushdie’s postmodern and/or postcolonial style is often difficult to define or locate because of the similarities postmodernism shares with postcolonialism; furthermore, postcolonialism, like postmodernism, often resists concrete definition, which adds to the difficulty in characterizing it. However, *Midnight’s Children* can be seen, arguably, as a postmodern novel as well as a postcolonial one, thus necessitating a forward “and/or” slash between the terms “postmodern” and “postcolonial,” such that the novel becomes
“postcolonial/postmodern.” Rushdie’s writing, and *Midnight’s Children* in particular, straddles postmodernism and postcolonialism in this way, leaving his fiction as a categorical style in flux.

The same can be said of the way that Wallace’s work occupies a space between postmodernism and post-postmodernism. As when reading Rushdie, it becomes difficult to categorize Wallace as only a postmodern writer given his criticism of postmodernism. Wallace utilizes postmodern techniques throughout “The Suffering Channel” and all of his fiction, but the function of this postmodern style is often utilized ironically to criticize the style itself. Wallace then straddles postmodernism and post-postmodernism in “The Suffering Channel” and throughout most of his fiction in much the same way that Rushdie straddles postcolonialism and postmodernism; both writers incorporate a sort of duel conceptual style in their fiction. I will argue that these dual styles create the paradox that is essential to creating metonymic modes of identity in their work. Rushdie embraces paradox in order to deconstruct socio-political hegemony by, for instance, creating a protagonist whose actions literally and figuratively affect India and the various histories surrounding its independence from the British Empire. Wallace embraces paradox by creating double binds throughout “The Suffering Channel” in order to question the socio-cultural homogeneity of waste, disgust, and suffering by creating a character whose art is both literally and figuratively shit.

While Rushdie’s and Wallace’s characters exhibit paradoxes on multiple levels, these paradoxes repeatedly point to the fact that Rushdie’s protagonist in *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem Sinai, is able to affect India supernaturally only because of his fragmented identity as an Indian, Anglo-Indian, post-colonized Indian, and post-colonized British subject. In Wallace’s “The Suffering Channel,” Brint Moltke is reputedly able to defecate fully formed sculptures, raising
questions about the relative definitions of “art” and the artist. Both characters’ roles are central to developing an overarching sense of identity.

One of the main arguments of this thesis is that Rushdie and Wallace establish identity and meaning through metonymical and paradoxical connections. The first chapter of this thesis will establish a basic definition of metonymy and its theoretical implications. Metonymic structures, particularly in regards to identity, are most often discussed through postcolonialism. In order to establish a strong definition of metonymy and, by necessity, metaphor, I am using Jacques Lacan’s definitions and explanations in Écrits and in Book III of his seminars. These definitions are further supplemented by entries from the Oxford English Dictionary and other sources. Both Lacan and the OED establish a general understanding of metonym as a substitution, comparison, or relation made by association, the “one side (versant) of the effective field constituted by the signifier,” rather than “the other side . . . metaphor,” as a substitution, comparison, or relation made by representation (Écrits 156). Lacan establishes the dichotomy between metaphor and metonymy, presenting them as opposing linguistic functions.

The final portion of the first chapter will discuss how paradox and metonymy are specifically postcolonial distinctions. Mishra and Hodge posit that, because “meaning arises out of a discourse of marginality,” meaning “in postcolonial texts [is] constructed metonymically, not metaphorically” (286). Associating meaning, and by extension identity, with metonymy in postcolonial literature enables me to contrast its function with that of mimesis. Mimesis, in a postcolonial context, is an always already failed mode of representation: imitating, parroting, copying, and mimicking colonial elements inadvertently and inevitably creates flawed representations. To establish the mirroring effect of mimesis in postcolonialism, I will rely on Homi K. Bhabha’s essay “Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some
Forms of Mimeticism.” Bhabha points out the inevitable failure of mimesis on a postcolonial level where the colonized can only mimic an “imperfect” representation of the colonized. In a postmodern context, mimesis is attributed to the self-referentiality of metafiction. The warped characteristics of the mirrors in the work of John Barth, as referenced in Wallace’s “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” suggest a hyper-relative mode of representation – as in representation endlessly turning into its own representation – that leaves no grounds upon which to identify. The mimesis inherent in postmodernism via metafiction fails on the grounds of turning mirrors in on themselves, thus creating an infinite chain of possibilities without leaving any possible representation with which to identify.

The second chapter will examine Midnight’s Children and the paradox and metonymy Rushdie utilizes throughout to establish postmodern/postcolonial identity. It may seem that Midnight’s Children, published in 1980, has already run its critical course and is becoming irrelevant. But Neel Srivastava’s 2008 study, Secularism in the Postcolonial Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narrative in English, published the same year as Wallace’s suicide, suggests that Midnight’s Children continues to occupy an important place in literary criticism. Srivastava’s study examines several of Rushdie’s works, including Midnight’s Children, as postcolonial texts. As the oldest novel studied in Srivastava’s book, Midnight’s Children is within what he identifies as the “Rushdie generation,” a 16-year arc between Midnight’s Children’s Booker Prize and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things Booker Prize awarded in 1997 (3). The fact that Midnight’s Children remains relevant to our contemporary generation supports the novel as a relevant seminal text to my argument.

In contrast to Srivastava’s postcolonial study, Sabrina Hassumani’s study of Rushdie’s fiction, Salman Rushdie: A Postmodern Reading of His Major Works, focuses solely on Rushdie
as a postmodern writer. She establishes her interpretation as a “reading of Rushdie . . . by poststructuralist and postmodern theory . . . focusing on the manner in which Rushdie is a postmodern writer whose subject is the postcolonial moment” (13). While Hassumani is certainly correct in interpreting Rushdie’s fiction through a postmodern lens, to consider Rushdie’s style as somehow not postcolonial despite his focus on a postcolonial moment differs from my argument. Rushdie’s fiction is not definitively compartmentalized in either postmodernism or postcolonialism, but always immersed in both. Postmodernism and postcolonialism resist definition in their own ways, and Rushdie’s work reflects this characteristic of both. In other words, Rushdie’s fiction is postmodern/postcolonial; as noted earlier, this creates a paradox rather than a contradiction. Nevertheless, Hassumani’s reading of Rushdie’s major works, is useful in that it the notion of paradox central to my study.

In terms of conceptual styles, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, suggest that postcolonial issues precede postmodern and poststructuralist issues: “the conditions of post-colonial experience encouraged the dismantling of notions of essence and authenticity somewhat earlier than the recent expressions of the same perception in contemporary European post-structuralist theory” (40). Poststructuralism, and by extension postmodernism, would have not been realized as we know it today without the condition of postcolonial experiences. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s argument reduces the seemingly wide disparities between Rushdie and Wallace on a stylistic level. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge further explain in “What is Post(-)colonialism?” that “the postcolonial as a category subsumes the postmodern” (288). My second chapter will also consider M. Keith Booker’s *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie* and Rustom Bharucha’s *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fictions of Salman Rushdie*. 
Regarding metonym, this second chapter will establish how Rushdie, in establishing paradox, also creates metonymic modes of identity. Samir Dayal’s essay, “Talking Dirty: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*,” reveals Rushdie’s constant valorization of the base and low, glorifying the disgusting or gross. This is most commonly seen throughout *Midnight’s Children* through snot, though there are several other instances where the gross (as opposed to waste) is referenced as stuff of significance. The raising of the low establishes metonymic modes of connection utilized throughout *Midnight’s Children*; by extension, this becomes the means by which Rushdie creates metonymical and paradoxical identity structures. This is how Rushdie generates a metonymic mode of identity and, in effect, incites empathy.

Rushdie’s use of metonymic connections to produce empathy paves the way for my reading of Wallace in the third chapter, which focuses on Wallace’s essay “E Unibus Plurum,” his first published short story “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” and a later short story, “The Suffering Channel.” “The Suffering Channel,” by focusing on actual pieces of shit used in representing art, creates yet another connection to Rushdie through things generally considered revolting or unappealing. The involvement of waste as taboo, the body, and the suffering these elements can also produce will establish the paradoxically metonymical modes of connection that bridge the differences between *Midnight’s Children* and “The Suffering Channel.”

The first part of chapter three will deal with Wallace’s depiction of metonymical identity and identification. “The Suffering Channel,” as his title suggests, is not one that necessarily valorizes the low as Dayal argues Rushdie does in *Midnight’s Children*, but connects with Rushdie in regards to the function and properties of waste. While Rushdie’s snot and grossness is seen as the source to magic, power, and connection, Wallace’s story suggests the power found in
the disgusting and a metonymic connection through the act of producing art/shit. Through various grades of suffering, Wallace makes powerful metonymic connections between his characters and audience. For Wallace, the disgusting creates double binds and paradox between necessities and taboos that do not necessarily promote valorization, but rather generate greatly needed empathetic connections. According to Wallace, such connections are needed because contemporary American society, at least insofar as his generation is concerned, is a collective group essentially numb to itself and to those around it. In a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace states that “We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy’s impossible” (Burns 22). Wallace establishes that fiction has a different role in a post-postmodern generation. As he continues in the same statement, “But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters’ pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own” (Burns 22). Thus Wallace, as will be further discussed in chapter three, is attempting in “The Suffering Channel,” and throughout his fiction, to connect with an audience through imaginative, metonymic means of identification, often through the use of the disgusting.

Wallace’s description of a generation numb to itself echoes John Barth’s postmodern writing style, metafiction. To Wallace, metafiction is the pinnacle of postmodern fiction, and he describes his contemporary generation as one influenced by this fiction so that it has becomes apathetic to, and reliant upon, excess. The second part of this chapter will address what I call the postmodern condition, which has close ties with the metaphorical implications seen in mirroring and metafiction. Wallace’s “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way” is a response to Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse,” which employs metafictional techniques of self-reference and turned, warped mirrors throughout. I am using Barth’s text as an explanation of how postmodern
fiction is structurally metaphorical, and how, in effect, it implodes. The mirroring effects mentioned throughout “Funhouse” add another complication to metaphorical structure in mimesis. Wallace’s depiction of the relationship between mimesis and metaphor emerges in his critique of Barth, and I establish this connection through a close reading of “Funhouse” and “Westward.”

Metafiction as a literary technique in which “the author sell-consciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions and narrative techniques” (OED) functions as a sort of mirror held up to the fiction’s creator; while readers read the text, the author reminds the reader of his or her role as creator of the fiction. The irony this technique has been adopted by television as well, and Wallace goes into great detail in “E Unibus Pluram” to describe how the characteristics of excessive irony have become clichéd and now inform the addictive properties of television. Wallace explains how, when watching television, the viewer begins to imagine her/himself watching television, generating an effect similar to that produced by metafiction. In response to this problem, Wallace argues in “E Unibus Pluram” the need for empathy. The final part of this chapter will examine how Wallace uses metonymic modes of connection as a means of inducing empathy.

In building a connection between Rushdie and Wallace, I will argue that it is important to recognize the differences between empathy and sympathy as they relate to the differences between metonym and metaphor. According to the OED, empathy is “the quality or power of projecting one’s personality into or mentally identifying oneself with an object of contemplation, and so fully understanding or appreciating it.” As now more commonly understood, it is “[t]he ability to understand or appreciate another person’s feelings, experiences, etc.” Empathy connotes an empirical connection with an object; thus some form of association between the
object and one’s personality or capacity to mentally identify is necessary to invoke empathy. In contrast, sympathy is “conformity of feelings, inclinations, or temperament, which makes persons agreeable to each other,” or “the quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other; the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another or others; fellow-feeling. Also, a feeling or frame of mind evoked by and responsive to some external influence.” Sympathy connotes a simple affect, which can be arbitrary and entirely unassociated with the sympathizer or the sympathized. In other words, sympathy does not connote an empirical connection, whereas empathy necessitates one.

The differences between empathy and sympathy may seem subtle, and it may come as no surprise that these terms are often used synonymously. However, “the ability to understand or appreciate another person’s feelings, experiences, etc.” is not the same as “the quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a similar feeling” or “a feeling or frame of mind evoked by and responsive to some external influence.” Empathy requires an ability to understand or appreciate, which is more than a simple affect. This ability to understand or appreciate requires experiencing a similar affect as the other person. Empathizing means being able to relate to something or someone by experience of some sort. Sympathy only requires an affect, not understanding or appreciation (though these may also be involved with sympathy). Empathy and sympathy are thus comparable to metonym and metaphor in this way: empathy, as necessitating a comparison by association, is metonymical, while sympathy, as necessitating a comparison by representation, is metaphorical. If sympathy is simply feeling sorry for a being or thing based on an imagined relation to the being or thing, then it is definitively representational or metaphorical; however, if empathy is feeling sorry for a being or thing based on an empirical, experiential
relation to the being or thing, then it is definitively associative or metonymic. Thus the metonymical structure resides inherently within Wallace’s plea for something different in a generation addicted to televisual stimulation; it also exhibits connections to metonymic structure in Rushdie.

“The Suffering Channel,” which depicts a journalist’s assignment to cover the story of an artist who defecates miniature sculptures, creates empathetic connections through several different forms of suffering. Suffering permeates the narrative, begging questions about the meaning of suffering in much the same way as the artist’s, Brint Moltke, shit art. Suffering is in question not only as a result of the inherent pain Skip experiences with his knee via a mysterious knee injury, but also through the suffering Brint Moltke eventually agrees to in allowing his bowel movement to be filmed, the suffering which Style magazine employees incur for themselves through constant exercising and dieting, and, of course, through the suffering caused in reaction to or association with the September 11th attacks. While all of the suffering depicted throughout the story is not equal – it would hardly be fair to say that Skip’s knee, hurt during some unverified form of infidelity with Brint Moltke’s wife, Amber, is the same as Brint Moltke’s shame of defecating on live television – Wallace depicts suffering as apparently necessary. Skip’s hurt knee occurs as a result of making arrangements with Amber Moltke, whose questionable motivations for forcing Brint to agree to Skip’s terms are necessary to force Brint into working with Skip. Thus Skip, in a sense, agrees to the pain in what may seem like a masochistic gesture. Similarly, the Style employees are described as constantly exercising and dieting at an intense level, causing themselves pain for various reasons. Brint Moltke’s suffering is perhaps the worst on two levels—first, he is extremely timid and insecure, and (something ignored by Amber and unacknowledged by Skip); and second, his live performance will either
confirm or deny his claims of producing the art as is, implying that the possibility of lying about his abilities continuously haunts him throughout his experience.

No matter the type of suffering, Wallace includes suffering throughout the story and leaves the questions of Brint’s shit-art unanswered in order to exemplify and evoke a metonymical reaction on the part of the reader to the suffering wrought throughout the story. He means to invoke empathy in his readership, a relation by association, a feeling based upon experiencing those feelings, and a relationship to suffering, art, and shit. “The Suffering Channel” clearly exhibits a move towards metonymical identity and meaning, just as does Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Wallace builds a metonymical identity and meaning structure much like that of Srivastava’s “the Rushdie generation,” but as a clear critique of postmodern discourse rather than postcolonialism.

My conclusion will focus on how a larger conversation might be opened up by my comparison of Rushdie and Wallace. In terms of metonym and empathy in both Rushdie and Wallace, I draw a connection to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism*. As Appiah writes, “we should learn about other people in other places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another” (78). Understanding one another requires the capacity or ability to relate to others by association; the urge is to make a comparison by association. The metonym, in this case, is an empathetic one meant to draw connections between the empathizer and the persons empathized with. In this way, Rushdie and Wallace’s metonymic modes of identity and empathy draw inferences from a broader philosophical level. Cosmopolitanism as a philosophy generally associated with commonwealth literature may not seem relevant to the US, and I would not go so far as to argue that Wallace was attempting to
establish this specific sort of philosophical structure. As Wallace was an expert in modal philosophy, however, it is not a far-fetched notion to see his urge for empathy, especially as a part of the role of fiction in contemporary literature, as an aid to what he saw in a suffering generation. Perhaps we can infer from Wallace’s “The Suffering Channel” that even Appiah’s cosmopolitan would be unnecessary without some form of suffering. Appiah defines cosmopolitanism as an urge to understand, and suffering is a part of understanding.

Drawing connections between Rushdie, Wallace, Appiah, et cetera also reveals political implications in Wallace. Rushdie, who is heavily studied for his politics, stands in stark contrast to Wallace, who is rarely studied through political lenses. When considering the addictive properties of television described in “E Unibus Plurum” and the climax of suffering literally channeled at the end of “The Suffering Channel,” Wallace may be implying that contemporary American social structures are more influenced by the paradoxical, dehumanizing addictive habits formed by watching too much television. If Wallace calls attention to power movements and structures like television networks or governmental bodies, then “The Suffering Channel” makes clear that such power systems/structures are more machine than human, promoting solipsistic immorality as a means of advancing within hierarchies of power. These associations with power centers strengthen the metonymic bridge between Rushdie and Wallace.
1  METONYMY AND MODES OF IDENTITY

1.1  Metonymy

In comparison to metonymy, metaphor and simile are more familiar figures of speech in writing and literature; they are commonly used and identified while metonymy often seems avoided for being misunderstood. Jacques Lacan states in his 1955-56 seminars that, “[o]wing to the properties of the signifier and the signified, the constant temptation the linguists, and a fortiori those who aren’t linguists, succumb is to consider that it’s what is the most obvious in the phenomenon that says it all . . . The emphasis they place on metaphor, which has always been studied much more than metonymy, is proof of this” (The Seminar 224). Lacan finds that metaphor is the more obvious trope and the easier connection to establish in contrast to metonymy. Similarly, Natash Sajé states that “[m]etaphor has received by far the most critical attention, and is also the trope most closely connected with poetry” (47). As Ines Mzali points out, “Most studies of tropes derive from Roman Jakobson’s formalist distinction between the two as springing from two linguistic strategies of association”; furthermore, metaphor “marks the paradigmatic movement that works through the principle of substitution whereas the metonym moves along the syntagmatic axis” (87). Lacan also follows Jakobson’s distinctions and often attributes to him several examples used throughout his seminars and writings. It would appear that metaphor, insofar as figures of speech are concerned, is the preferred trope amongst writers and readers alike.

Metonymy is widely misunderstood and unrecognized because it seems to represent a more complicated function than metaphor or simile, even though metonymy, like metaphor, is also a comparison. Mzali explains that “[metonymy] represents contiguity since both elements of the metonymy exist coevally on the same plane, but also displacement as meaning slides from
one to the other” (87). The vehicle between metonymic elements freely moves along the ground of comparison, which, as Mzali suggests, creates the contiguity between them. How this comparative relationship occurs on a linguistic plane and, later, projects upon modes of identity, depends entirely on how the trope is defined; furthermore, speaking of metonym on a linguistic plane reveals even more significance when contrasted with metaphor. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines metonym as “the process of semantic association involved in producing and understanding metonymy . . . a figure of speech characterized by the action of substituting for a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc., or a word or phrase denoting a property or something associated with it.” Metaphor is defined as “a figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable; or, something regarded as representative or suggestive of something else, especially as a material emblem of an abstract quality, condition, notion, etc.; a symbol or token” (*OED*).

Lacan defines metonymy as “the rhetorical form that is the opposite of metaphor involving substitution for something that has to be named – we are in fact at the level of the name. One thing is named by another that is its container, or its part, or that is connected to it” (*The Seminar* 220). Lacan defines metaphor as an identification rather than a comparison, where “metaphor presupposes that a meaning is the dominant datum and that it deflects, commands, the use of the signifier to such an extent that the entire species of pre-established, I should say lexical, connections comes undone . . . once the meaning has ripped the signifier from its lexical connections” (*The Seminar* 218). When breaking these different senses of each trope into major characteristics, metonym becomes a process of semantic association or substitution of one part of itself for another; in contrast, metaphor becomes a transferring of one thing for a different thing.
Pam Houston explains the significance of these tropes in “A Hopeful Sign: The Making of Metonymic Meaning in Munro’s ‘Meneseteung’”: “A metaphoric relationship is a relationship where one word is substituted for another . . . a relationship of analogy [providing] a totalizing view of narrative within a closed and complete system. A metonymic relationship is a relationship based on association, connection, proximity . . . a relationship by copresence” (Houston 82). Houston is careful to note how metaphor’s vehicle of comparison is in words, leaving the grounds for comparison in analogy as an otherwise arbitrary representation. Houston explains that “Lacan defines [metonymy] as ‘word by word,’ a relationship based on contiguity and context” (82). The “‘word by word’” phrase alludes directly to Lacan’s description of metaphor: “One word for another: that is the formula for the metaphor” (Écrits 157). Thus what emerges is a definition of metaphor as one word substituted for another word and metonym as one word substituted by another word; the prepositions between them generate the distinctions.

These more general descriptions of metaphor and metonym work well linguistically. Lacan details in Écrits an explanation of the distinction between metonym and metaphor as an algorithm using a stereotypical metonym, “I serve the crown.” For metonym, the relationship between the signifier and signified works horizontally in that one element reciprocates as part of another element, as symbolized by this formula:

\[ f(S \ldots S')S \equiv S(-)s \]

The function \( f \) begins with the signifier moving along the signifying chain, which is equal or approximate to a horizontal bar of separation between the signifier (S) and signified (s): “the metonymic structure, indicating that it is the connexion between signifier and signifier that permits the elision in which the signifier installs the lack-of-being in the object relation, using the

\[ ^1 \text{All Lacanian algorithms come from Écrits 164.} \]
value of ‘reference back’ possessed by signification in order to invest it with the desire aimed at the very lack it supports” (164). It may also be beneficial to note that the bar of separation (–) should not be confused with the symbol for subtraction known in algebra; in this formula, the symbol represent a horizontal bar rather than subtraction, which will become important when exploring the metaphor formula. As Lacan explains, “the sign – laced between ( ) represents here the maintenance of the bar –.” Metonymy exists between the crown and what “the crown” is meant to connote. “The crown,” simply put, is part of the king and, thus, the kingdom. Other variations of “the crown” may be, “the head” or “the hair of the king.” Any of these examples reveals the association between the king’s person and the kingdom. It is fine to note that this is technically a synecdoche as well, but that does not diminish the fact that it is also, and first of all, a metonym. The signifier (S), “crown”, thus relates horizontally to the kingdom (s). It may be beneficial to imagine the signifying chain here like a timeline of meaning where one signifier moves next to the other, i.e. crown to king, king to kingdom.

In contrast, metaphor is structured much differently. Lacan gives this algorithm:

$$f(S/S')S \ni S(+)s$$

Again, not to be confused with algebraic functions and symbols, the slash separating signifier and signifying chain (S/S’) is not a division sign, nor is the symbol between signified and signifier (+) an addition sign. Rather, the algorithm represents the vertical relationship between metaphorically structured elements. The signifier (S) is fixed above the signifying chain, which equates with or approximates to a vertical bar of separation between the signifier and signified (s) as opposed to the horizontal bar of maintenance in metonymy.

To use an equally stereotypical metaphor in application of this formula, “You are my sunshine,” the substitution is one word for another word, such that the second person “you”
substitutes for “sunshine.” However, there is no horizontal relation in meaning between the signifier (S) and signified (s); both “you” and “sunshine” are wholly unrelated, and thus the relation “you” to “sunshine” is fixed above the signifying chain. The non-related comparison creates the vertical bar between the signifier and signified in contrast to the related horizontal relationship found in metonymy.

Yet metaphor’s “fixed points” along the signifying chain are deceiving. The fixity of the trope seems to have more to do with the ease at which such connections are made rather than its strength along the signifying chain. Lacan notes in Book XVIII of his seminars: “When one reads the rhetoricians, one realizes that they never get to an entirely satisfactory definition of metaphor, or of metonymy. This results in, for example, the formula that metonymy is an impoverished metaphor. One might say that the thing is to be taken in exactly the opposite sense – metonymy exists from the beginning and makes metaphor possible” (*The Seminar* 227). The implication is that metaphor depends upon metonymy. Houston reasons, “Metaphor assumes an independence while metonymy assumes a dependency,” a dependency of “absence or lack,” thus distinguishing patency and latency: “Metaphor is patent, while metonymy is latent” (82). By explaining metaphor’s vertical linguistic structure in contrast to metonymy’s horizontal structure, Houston concludes, “Any metaphor we make is shifting, metonymically, even as it is written, and as each word is written after it, it shifts again and again. Meaning can only be derived metonymically because the context is at every moment changing” (83). Because language and signifying chains are moving and changing, metaphors can never actually be fixed in place despite the illusion they create. In this sense, metaphor, the privileged trope becomes dependent upon the less privileged metonym. Metaphor depends upon metonymy.
Because metaphor is typically privileged, metaphor assumes independence and implies dominance over metonym; however, metaphor is neither independent from metonym, nor does metaphor dominate metonym. As Lacan explains, “Metaphor, then, is dependent upon metonymy for its existence in the same way that men are dependent on female sexuality for their existence, and metaphor attempts to deny metonymy’s originary importance in the same way that men try to deny the originary importance of women” (quoted in Houston 85). Furthermore, the relationship is, like so much thus far, something that is seemingly one thing and simultaneously not, suggesting paradoxical characteristics inherent in language at a syntactical level.

In general, metonymy “channels meaning through a particular set of connotations” (Mzali 87). Meaning is derived via a comparison, substitution, or relation by association; there is a “link in the text itself.” Therefore, “[c]ontiguity and absence of exact equivalence also imply displacement from one to the other. Paradoxically then, contiguity and displacement form the two guiding principles of the trope, and this inherent paradox accounts for possibly conflicting implications of representation through metonymy” (Mzali 87). Metonymy is definitively paradoxical and also, dare I say, metonymic. The distinctions between metonymy and metaphor, in short, are metonyms metonymically functioning as distinctions: as tropes, metaphor and metonymy are both displaced by one another, but (paradoxically) remain simultaneously contiguous.

Noting the paradoxical relationship between metaphor and metonymy proves very useful in reading both Rushdie and Wallace, as the next chapters will demonstrate. Before turning to that analysis, however, it is crucial to understand how metonymy relates to identity. Identity, in Rushdie’s words, answers the question, “Who what am I?” (Midnight’s Children 440). The question itself depicts a paradox of sorts, where the interrogative “who” is inseparable from
“what.” This paradox, as I will argue, is necessary to postcolonial identity, but nevertheless necessitates an associative connection between the self, “who,” and all of what connotes “what” (e.g. social, political, cultural contexts). The albeit paradoxical identity creates an associative structure of the self, as the next section explains.

1.2 Syntax of the Self

Stephen Clingman’s *The Grammar of Identity* speaks explicitly to the grammatical connections between the self and identity as established in postcolonial fiction. As Clingman states, “The premise is that there is a correlation between how the self is put together and how we navigate ourselves through space and time. It is the how that we can understand as a form of grammar, and movement is intrinsic to its constitution” (11). The nature of metonym as a postcolonial mode of identity in relation to moving borders and boundaries informs the whole of Clingman’s analysis.

Clingman is quick to note potential similarities between metaphor and metonymy insofar as how they relate to substitution. Borrowing the metonym, “The pen is mightier than the sword,” Clingman establishes the paradox between metaphor and metonymy mentioned in the introduction and in the previous section of this chapter. Clingman explains how the paradoxical relationship between metaphor and metonymy and the paradoxes metonymy generates reinforces and informs the grammar of identity or the syntax of self: “it helps us to get close to our subjects” (14). The conflict generated by the shared properties of metaphor and metonym is addressed as a contradiction at first, but Clingman explains how the paradox centers around axes in the way Lacan symbolizes metaphor and metonym as a vertical relationship (metaphor) and a horizontal one (metonymy). Clingman posits that “[w]hat matters as much as axis is orientation, tendency, transition. And tendencies remain: where metaphor will incline more to the
substitutive, the intrinsic capacities of metonymy for combination admit unfolding and something unexpected results” (14). Potential crossflow between metonymy and metaphor is then less contradictory and more paradoxical as both tropes, most often considered opposites, function accordingly despite shared and opposing characteristics.

Thus Clingman establishes that metonymy, in all its apparent lack and latency, “allows transition, navigation, mutation, alteration, a whole morphology of meanings true even of the metonymic element in metaphor” (15). If metaphor is something that fixes things in place, then establishing a means of identity for the colonized is impossible since they have no other options than mimetic and metaphorical modes of representation (more of which is discussed in the next section of this chapter). Clingman continues by going to some length to explain how identity, insofar as how we represent ourselves, relies upon difference. In summary, to say “I am x” is to say that “I” is the sum total of “x,” leaving little or no possible connection with others outside a collectively preconditioned and preempted sense of “x’s”; in like manner, to refocus identity in the second-person sense, “You are y” leads to closure and exclusion beyond the first-person individual in relation to others. This prohibits connection between x and y, echoing Lacan’s algorithm of vertical barring with regard to metaphor; in this restricted sense, “I” cannot be y nor “You” x, and to suppose “I” or “You” could be both x and y seems impossible. Yet these connections, Clingman notes, are desired, especially insofar as a colonial identity is concerned. Making these connections is dependent on difference on a discursive, literary, and syntactical level. Boundaries, like grammar, are in constant flux and permeation, but are not like the linguistic bar Lacan establishes throughout his psychoanalytical linguistics: “the boundary is not limit but the space of transition” (22). As Clingman notes, “difference is not the barrier to navigation, but the very ground of its possibility and necessity” (23). Thus preconditioned
dichotomies (e.g. us-them, master-slave, colonizer-colonized) establish the possibility and
necessity of difference. The dichotomies appearing to limit identity establish the ground upon
which identity is possible as they utilize difference; the “lines” drawn between “us” and “them,”
for instance, necessitate difference between “us” in opposition to “them,” and vice versa.

Clingman’s use of boundaries and lines is meant to act metaphorically and
metonymically as well. The boundaries he uses represent identity, but, as he explains, are also
associated with location: “If identity is often connected with location, then we can put location,
too, under the same lens. The fact is that landscape itself is intrinsically metonymic, as one
feature literally leads to another” (23). It is fitting then, for instance, that Saleem Sinai’s identity,
emerging out of the events of August 15th, 1947, is so easily symbolized by his metonymically
Indian facial topography where his massive nose, birthmarks on either side of his head, and snot
represent India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka respectively. If there were ever a metonym
for India, Saleem Sinai is its manifestation. Saleem explicitly explains his paradoxical,
metonymic identity as being both his father’s son and not his father’s son and implies that he is
both Indian and not Indian. Saleem Sinai is both $x$ and not $x$, $y$ and not $y$, as well as $x$ and $y$.

Likewise, the setting of “The Suffering Channel” foreshadows the September 11th, 2001,
destruction of the New York City Twin Towers, establishing an identity to national experience, a
connection of association between Wallace’s characters and American readers. The fictional
characters, who are largely located in the Twin Towers, become associated with the real
destruction of the towers and the death of many who were there. In both instances, identity is
connected metonymically to location. Americans reading “The Suffering Channel” do not
necessarily relate directly to the characters as people, though an American can identify with them
as Americans. Readers are $x$, characters are $y$, and both connect loosely in terms of this
nationality, yet everyone, readers and characters alike, relate to defecation and suffering. Paradoxically displaced and contiguous identities, or metonymic identity, exist on a syntactical or grammatical level as Clingman posits, as well as within other borders and boundaries including those between different languages and cultures.

1.3 Mimicry and Metaphor

Mishra and Hodge agree with Clingman that metonymy is specifically relevant to postcolonialism: “meanings are not culture-specific and in postcolonial texts are constructed metonymically, not metaphorically” (286). Part of the reason postcolonial texts (and, as noted, identity) are constructed metonymically is because they reveal a sort of failure of metaphor as that which insists on fixed comparative representation. As Mzali notes, “Metaphor was regarded with suspicion given its history in the construction of colonial discourse as a coercive trope deployed to fix identities and to promote a Eurocentric, universalist vision of the world” (88). When it comes to colonialism and Western traditions then, metaphorical modes of identity fit well. Consider, for instance, the British empire, the construct of which was for centuries representative of, as Mzali says it, a “Eurocentric, universalist vision of the world.” This comparison by representation directly contrasts with postcolonial metonymic modes of identity in resistance.

As Mzali continues, “metonymy, according to Homi Bhabha, signals difference. In his [1984 essay], Bhabha sketches the difference he perceives between metaphor and metonymy in ways that were instrumental in launching a particular postcolonial interpretation of these figures” (88). Bhabha’s approach to these distinctions in this context focuses primarily on mimesis and mimetic modes of representation. Mzali’s mention of Bhabha refers to “Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of some Forms of Mimeticism,” which begins by first
establishing the relationships and links between literature and history, “as well as the history of literature enabling a perspective of essential order, coherence, culmination, and Culture.” (##)

The essay then moves on to explain “an undeniable collaboration between historicism and realism” (94).

Mzali continues to explain that Bhabha focuses on “the order of literary history” and its relation to an “essentially unmediated nature of reality;” furthermore, he challenges the notion of the history of the novel and traditional literary canons insofar as they essentially marginalize foreign works (94). If literature is a part of history, then history is limited to that literature accepted by the literary critics as worthy of being included in literary canons, leaving many works without a voice. The problem when establishing history this way is a problem of representing history and reality, which Bhabha uses to propose “that the category of literature, as of its history, is necessary and thoroughly [sic] mediated: that its reality is not given but produced; its meanings transformative, history and relational rather than revelatory; its continuity and coherence underscored by division and difference” (96). For Bhabha, reality is a construct; the production of reality opposes the notion of a primordial reality, though this idea of a “given” reality is the premise of the literary history to which he refers. The significance in this assertion is that the order of literary history then necessarily marginalizes other histories because they do not conform to the same realities as those determining the literary history.

Thus origins are placed into question, posing “intimations of the construction of the unity of the sign (as opposed to its primordial ‘givenness’), and the resulting stability of the signified which, paradoxically, suggests the possibility of its arbitrariness, that is, the irony of its repression of discontinuity and difference in the construction of ‘sense’, those modes of meaning that we call realism and historicism” (Bhabha 97). Realism and historicism are then based on
presumptuous notions of representation and representative constructs forming a frame around that which is, again, historically “acceptable” through a realistic lens. The colonized, in the meantime, are cut out of the historic or realistic image produced by western tradition: “To represent the colonial subject is to conceive of the subject of difference, of an-other history and an-other culture” (98). The hyphenated “another,” cutting out the colonized, reveals an abject failure at becoming another history, “an other” history as it fails to fully represent the reality of the colonizer.

Insofar as literary representation is concerned, realism is something constructed that indeed does not realistically capture any given subject. This construct is an imperial myth, a myth colonialists were eager to construct as a historical narrative of conquest and civilization. Yet this perspective, this reality, glosses the colonized in multifarious ways. The colonized, or those invaded, settled on, were not able to fully assimilate to the colonizer’s culture. In much the same way Ahmed Sinai attempts to mimic a British accent when speaking with William Methwold, his parroting is admirable, but ineffective. In like manner, Brint Moltke’s “mimicking” of great art attempts to represent artistic skill and artifice, but produces far less than the great art itself both in terms of size, form, and questionable construction.

Bhabha’s theoretical framework helps explain Ahmed’s and Moltke’s mimetic failures in terms of image analysis, that is in terms of analyzing the appearance of things. Bhabha writes, “it is a predominantly mimetic view of the relation between the text and a given pre-constituted reality . . . From such a concept of textual reference, it follows that the representation – the literary text – becomes the image of the represented – the given reality – which as the essential, original source determines the form and action of its means of representation” (99). In other words, Ahmed’s British accent, his failed mimesis, reinforces the polar notions of us and them,
colonizer and colonized: “The effect of such a placing of the text/reality, in terms of the subject/object structure of knowledge, traps the text within what Derrida calls a violent hierarchy ‘organized by the privileged term (Reality) to which the other term (the Text) is both necessitated and subordinated’” (100). Ahmed’s attempts are “incorrect;” his accent is not an accurate representation of a “proper” British accent; and he is himself a differentiated, othered persona of the British colony. Moltke’s attempts are literally (and to many figuratively) shit, or “incorrect,” his product is not an accurate representation of “proper” art, and he is himself a differentiated, othered persona of an excessive American nation. Again in the context of image analysis, Bhabha contends that “The ‘image’ must be measured against the ‘essential’ or ‘original’ in order to establish its degree of representativeness, the correctness of the image. The text is not seen as productive of meaning but essentially reflective or expressive” (99-100).

Ahmed and Moltke’s distorted mimeses, while not conforming to the “accepted,” “primordial” realities, also acknowledge difference.

The neglected, ignored, or trimmed excess of the failed parroting of English literary traditions reveals an undeniable locus of literary representation beyond discursive constructs of realism, historicism, and tradition. Ahmed’s English accent is awful because English is not his native language; the “incorrectness” of his attempts reveals an entirely different language altogether, though this is what the colonizer and western canon basically ignores. The same logic can be applied to Moltke, whose “shit art” is questionably art because art is not typically made of human waste, and the product is an imitation of what is already accepted as great art. Moltke could, like Ahmed, be creating an entirely different art altogether, though this is ignored by what the journalists and audience of his story. As Bhabha writes, “The problematic of ideology asserts the necessity for a system of representation as the medium necessary for the interpellation of the
subject in its relations to its ‘real’ conditions of existence” (106). That which does not hold up next to the mirror of the ‘real’ within the necessary system of representation becomes an other, a difference that does not conform to the fixed metaphorical representation, but rather to the reciprocating metonymic association.

Bhabha further reveals that the mirror of realism, insofar as western literary traditions are concerned, is perpetually distorted and cracked, not even necessarily as a result of imperialism, but as a construct of representation. The link between the order of literary history and unmediated origins is definitively bent to one side, reflecting instead a myth rather than a reality. The resulting images wrought by these distortions are negatively projected on the colonized. As Bhabha concludes, “In shattering the mirror of representation, and its range of Western bourgeois social and psychic ‘identifications’, the spectacle of colonial fantasy sets itself up as an uncanny ‘double’. Its terrifying figures – savages, grotesques, mimic men – reveal things so profoundly familiar to the West that it cannot bear to remember them” (119-20).

The notion of broken mirrors as a failing mimetic representation perhaps foreshadows Bhabha’s later syllogism, “almost the same, but not quite.” Bhabha’s syllogism roughly compares the colonized with the colonizer, where the colonized is almost the same as the colonizer, but not quite. Mimetically, the colonizers’ attempt at mimicking the colonizer always fails. The representation is not only warped, distorted, and broken, but also reinforces the violent hierarchies established throughout the colonial experience of us and them, self and other. Thus it is not too far a stretch to recognize the relationship mimesis has with metaphor: metaphor situates the signifier above the signifying chain, so mimesis, working like a mirror, is situated directly across from the signified. A successful mimesis/imitation thus functions as a whole mirror, while an unsuccessful mimesis functions as a broken-though-functioning mirror, and
metaphor functions via arbitrary comparisons, all three of which rest in the same place above the signifying chain as modes of representation. The connections of a failing mimeticism throughout postcolonialism not only connote the failure of metaphor as an accurate mode of identity, but also the means by which the postcolonial writer identifies her/himself. In other words, postcolonialism cannot rely upon metaphor or comparison by representation because representation is always already inaccurate to the postcolonial at the level of mimesis.

What was generally accepted as traditionally metaphorical is complicated by the hybridic, paradoxical, metonymic nature of things in a postcolonial sense. As Bhabha tells us, mimesis simply cannot work in a postcolonial system: representation is always already skewed, warped, and distorted despite the most valiant mimetic attempts. Simple realistic representation is impossible for the postcolonial. Saleem, for instance, could never be the “true”/“pure” son (or daughter) of India without also being, ancestrally, also British – even if he doesn’t know it for the majority of his young life. In a similarly mimetic sense, Brint Moltke’s work is never fully accepted as art; his figurines are of less importance to his fans despite their perfectly mimetic proportions when compared to other revered pieces of art. The “perfect figurines,” even as shit, are not accepted as “true” or “pure” art.

Bhabha asserts that colonial discourse is inherently ambivalent by way of “mimicry,” which is “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (“Representations” 122). The idea is that the representation of the colonized identity is only always part for the whole, a blurred vision of the thing it represents (metaphor) always seen as only a part of the whole (synecdoche/metonym). Postcolonial identity, then, even during colonial occupation, reveals that the closest thing the colonized could attain in identifying with the colonizer could only be partial and would inadvertently remain this way,
regardless of the quality of the colonizer’s camouflage. When applying this postcolonial mimicry to “The Suffering Channel,” many of the same complications arise due to the paradoxical, metonymic nature of Wallace’s narrative.

Mimetic representations in *Midnight’s Children* and “The Suffering Channel” fail because they are always only partial representations. The West Indian is Indian, but also British. The Indian, however, can never be wholly just British or just Indian; s/he will always only be both or part of the whole. The perfectly sculpted models of art can never be wholly just art or (in Moltke’s case) just shit; they will always only be both or part of the whole (puns, as Wallace certainly would want, are intended). The model of identity in each case is thus, not representational in part, but compares to the motherland and the empire by association. In like manner, the model of identity in Wallace’s story is not representational, but compares the act of shitting to every character by association. Their identity rests, then, wholly upon a metonymical mode of identification, a comparison of association allowing the postcolonial identity to exist in paradox.

2 PARADOX, MODES OF CONNECTION, AND SNOT

2.1 Identity by Paradox: Hybrid Notions of Self

This chapter will explore the paradoxical and metonymic modes of identity throughout *Midnight’s Children*. Having distinguished between metaphor, metonymy, and mimesis, an exploration of *Midnight’s Children* is necessary in order to establish the paradoxical and metonymic modes of identity inherent throughout. The first section will discuss paradoxical characteristics of hybridity, a term most often associated with postcolonial theory. As Saleem’s identity is paradoxical, it is also hybridic. The second section will then expand upon the idea of paradoxical hybridity by focusing on the function of Saleem’s autobiography/history/narrative as
it is written in English and as it is purposed to preserve. The third part will then discuss through this paradox how Saleem’s body and abilities are associated with waste and disgust. This section will then establish the metonymy of Saleem’s identity in constructing a necessarily paradoxical identity.

In the early days of postcolonial writing, writers were forced to deal with a constant, multi-faceted marginality. Not only were these writers forced to write against a Western dominated literary tradition as Indian writers, but were also faced with the challenge of deciphering where an Indian writer or Indian text situates independence in a hybridized cultural circumstance and a polylingual society. One of the most prevalent issues arising out of establishing an Indian text as such is the language in which it is written. The basic notion is that writing in English is, in a sense, reinforcing the colonial residue of oppression, which suggests that texts should be written in a local, “original” tongue. Yet this argument also forces the writer to question originality, authenticity, and even origins, especially as the writer raised in a colonial or postcolonial society where the colonizing language has become embedded within the culture. In effect, “originality” is deconstructed so that “the eventual consequence of notions of centrality and the ‘authentic’ were themselves necessarily questioned, challenged, and finally abrogated” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 40). Nevertheless, abrogating the “authentic” is not limited to a postcolonial context as decentering and deconstruction are seen in several different literatures as well, and is particularly characteristic of postmodernism.

Yet one characteristic that differentiates postcolonialism from postmodernism is postcolonial hybridity, which, “in the present is constantly struggling to free itself from a past which stressed ancestry, and which valued the ‘pure’ over its threatening opposite, the ‘composite’. It replaces a temporal lineality with a spatial plurality” (Ashcroft, Gareth, and Tiffin
The hybridic struggle for meaning or identity, as exemplified by Saleem Sinai, is one that is not limited to a single identity or meaning, but rather one as vast as the people in a nation. As Saleem notes, “There are as many versions of India as there are Indians” (*Midnight’s Children* 308). Furthermore, Saleem is only able to identify himself as one among and/or the whole of “(approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust; specs of voiceless dust” (36; 533). This does not mean that all identities and all meaning in postcolonial literature are, therefore, hybridic. As Ashcroft, Gareth, and Tiffin explain, “This is not to say that post-colonial critics have always avoided an essentialist view of language or of some ‘authentic’ cultural experience. The process of decolonization, which sometimes becomes a search for an essential cultural purity, does not necessarily harness the theoretical subversiveness offered by post-colonial literatures” (40). What this reveals is a potentially contradictory acceptance of difference in postcolonialism, as in an acceptance of difference that simultaneously subsumes the rejection of difference. In accepting difference, hybridic identity is created because it undercuts the force of resisting colonial influence; in rejecting difference for the sake of subverting the colonial system, the colonial system is potentially reinforced as a result of pursuing an original, authentic, pre-colonial culture.

Embracing contradiction is often what establishes the paradoxical nature of postcolonial, hybridic identity, which serves as a valuable approach to hybridity and a consistent characteristic throughout *Midnight’s Children*. The hybridic nature of Rushdie’s novel as defined by postcolonial criticism carries with it its own contentions, which both enable the conversation and reinforce an important postcolonial characteristic: paradox. In *Midnight’s Children*, hybridity is often paradoxical, not only on the narrative level of plot, dialogisms, theme, setting, etc., but also in the sense of Saleem functioning as both the part of something and not the part of something,
i.e. as both an individual and a whole entity. Saleem is and is not, for instance, just the narrator; he is and is not just the autobiographer; and he is and is not the narrator and autobiographer. He is the narrator insofar as his role as protagonist, but as *Midnight’s Children* is fiction, is not an autobiographer in the proper sense. He is an autobiographer insofar as his role in writing his story down, but as he is also telling the story to an illiterate one-woman audience of Padma, he is not a protagonist.

Saleem warns us in the opening pages of the novel, “I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well” (4). Saleem’s very fictionalized existence rails against several traditionally established entities, such as narrator, autobiographer, and narrator. Along with these parts of the novel, many other traditionally accepted constructs (e.g. authenticity, myth, history, identity, allegory) are deconstructed through the narrative in such a way that it is difficult not to think of deconstruction in a postmodern context. Still, Rushdie does not stop there. He takes a step further by describing what a decentered, broken traditional binary looks like, and how it functions.

When the Englishman William Methwold approaches Saleem’s parents, Ahmed and Amina Sinai, about selling his estate to them in its entirety before India is legally partitioned from Britain, Saleem describes Ahmed’s accent changing to mimic Methwold’s: “‘Tell me, Mr. Methwold,’ Ahmed Sinai’s voice has changed, in the presence of an Englishman it has become a hideous mockery of an Oxford drawl, ‘why insist on the delay? Quick sale is the best business, after all. Get the thing buttoned up’” (106). Of course, Ahmed is not alone in mimicking as Methwold also tries to imitate Saleem’s culture and does his part soon thereafter in pointing out an idiom he picked up since moving there: “‘Look around you: everything’s in fine fettle, don’t you agree? Tickety-boo, we used to say. Or, as you say in Hindustani: Sabkuch ticktock hai.
Everything’s just fine” (107). Ahmed Sinai’s mimicry of an Oxford drawl, despite all his best efforts, is at best close to, but not quite, the desired accent. The same can be said of Methwold’s Hindustani, where the relationship between “tickety-boo” and “ticktock” implies Hindustani’s subsumption of “tickety-boo” into its own, hybrid idiom, again translated by Methwold immediately thereafter. In a sense, Ahmed’s Oxford drawl is hybridic as he is speaking through an Indian accent, and Methwold’s use of “Sabkuch ticktock hai” is hybridic colloquially. Both of these examples, it will be argued, are paradoxical in nature; both are hybrids of sorts, and both are clearly embedded in language.

Yet Ahmed’s attempts at an English accent are done as an attempt to mimetically connect with Methwold, whereas Methwold’s attempts at Hindustani are not mimetic insofar as his desire is to connect with Ahmed. Ahmed is looking for recognition as an equal while Methwold is simply trying to make a deal. Methwold is, after all, using an already hybridized colloquial developed as an effect of colonialism, not really attempting to speaking with Ahmed as an equal. Bhabha’s notions of mimicry suggest a desire for equal connection that is not shared by the colonizers: “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (122). Ahmed’s “incorrect” accent is not the only instance of failed mimesis; Midnight’s Children constantly produces are hybridic notions of being British and of being Indian. The conversation between Ahmed and Methwold, and Saleem’s/Rushdie’s use of Western literary traditions, exemplify as much: “[Rushdie’s] subjectivity is a construct of Western and Eastern traditions, histories, and philosophies. This is the point he seems to be making in Midnight’s Children” (Ashcroft, Gareth, and Tiffin 22). What Ahmed, Saleem, and Rushdie all produce in their own ways is something almost, but not quite
the same, as what is considered the base of any mimesis; the result, in all its differentiation from the supposed “original,” generates hybridity characteristic of postcolonialism.

Hybridity is often paradoxical, yet it is necessary to briefly explore the nature of paradox for a moment, if only to clarify how it differs from simple contradiction. The *OED* offers several different definitions of paradox; however, the major theme running through the term in the context of postcolonial identity is the idea of simultaneously being and not being (of) something. It is the notion of “a statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief, especially one that is hard to believe,” of “an apparently absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition, or a strongly counter-intuitive one, which investigation, analysis, or explanation may nevertheless prove well-founded and true,” or of “a person or thing whose life or behaviour is characterized by paradox; a paradoxical phenomenon or occurrence, specifically one that exhibits some contradiction or conflict with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible” (*OED*). In contrast, contradiction does not hold the possibility of hybridity. It connects rather axiomatic, absolute, logical, deductive truth, standing then as more of a denial, repression, and opposition than a means to an end. Saleem Sinai, however, is paradoxical; he is, after all, both Indian and not Indian, both a Sinai and not a Sinai, oral storyteller and not oral storyteller, etc. Paradox abounds within and throughout *Midnight’s Children*.

Paradox, in this case, is a thing seemingly contradictory, i.e. something that opposes axiomatic principles and stands logically in the “wrong,” but proves with further explication and/or reason to stand in the “right.” One thing that *Midnight’s Children* does so predominantly as a postcolonial novel is to predicate itself upon a paradoxical mode of identity. Saleem’s life and India’s existence are presented as ostensibly connected: what happens to Saleem/India happens, in tandem, to India/Saleem. This could easily be disputed by any historian, but Saleem
acknowledges historical discrepancies before historians can. As the writer and storyteller, Salem is also playing the role of historian throughout the novel, acknowledging his blatant disregard for objectively-held and widely-accepted history on several occasions, debunking, in this way, the notions that he’s getting it all “wrong.” However, Saleem is not attempting to get everything “right” either. As mentioned above, Saleem states that there are as many versions of India as there are Indians, and his account is only one of all possible accounts. This perspective affords what seems like contradictions to exist “in truth” as correctly differing accounts, i.e. paradox.

Saleem’s entire existence also exists in paradox. The truth of Saleem’s birth and his “real” parents is revealed later to Saleem and the rest of the Sinais: Saleem is not, in fact, the son of Aadam and Amina Sinai, but rather the love child of an affair of the poverty stricken Anita Wonka with British real estate owner William Methwold switched at birth with Aadam and Amina’s biological child, Shiva. However, Anita Wonka’s husband, Wee Willie Wonka, was neither suspicious of nor aware of Anita’s infidelity or Methwold’s involvement since, to his knowledge, his son was clearly Indian; furthermore, he dies before Mary Pereira reveals her switch. Even then, Saleem’s potentially European features, particularly his large nose, are attributed to his grandfather. As Amina says to her husband Ahmed just after Saleem’s birth, “never doubting my authenticity for an instant . . . ‘Look, janum, the poor fellow, he’s got his grandfather’s nose’” (131). Thus Saleem, genetically and ancestrally, is not the son of Aadam and Amina, but is neither the son of Anita and Methwold. However, he is both their sons as well.

The paradoxical modes of identity exist for Saleem throughout the novel both in terms of form and diegesis. In terms of form, Saleem is both (and neither) the storyteller, narrator, writer, and autobiographer. He is one of these and all of them. Furthermore, he is the single human manifestation of India, though his inheritance is also shared with a nation and his midnight brother (who is not actually his bother) born at the stroke of midnight August 15th, 1947, Shiva.
Even this inheritance is and is not his own. Saleem is writing a novel/not a novel for his son, who is the biological son of Shiva and Parvati the Witch. The text thus also becomes the bequeathing of Saleem’s/India’s history to Aadam (not to be confused with Saleem’s grandfather, who is also not technically his grandfather). These paradoxes further exemplify hybrid notions exemplified in Bhabha’s notions of being almost, but not quite the thing: Saleem is the like a son, but not quite; Ahmed is like a father to Saleem, but not quite, and Aadam is like a son to Saleem, but not quite.

Saleem’s quest for identity and meaning in the face of absurdity is, in many ways, inherent with an innate opposition: “There is always, in the colonial regime, a tantalizing offer of subjectivity and its withdrawal which, for the colonized, momentarily confirms their entry into the world of the colonizer only to be rejected by it” (Mishra and Hodge 278). The acceptance and/or rejection of colonial or modern characteristics become the norm, setting the platform for inevitable and inadvertent paradox and hybridity. As Saleem expresses it,

How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term ‘modes of connection’ composed of ‘dualistically-combined configurations’ of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world. (*Midnight’s Children* 272-73)

Saleem’s life exists paradoxically in terms of language, narrative, fiction, and even postcolonialism. The self-proclaimed literal-metaphorical nature of Saleem’s relationship to
history, in a sense, changes the nature of metaphor itself; Saleem, as an individual Indian, directly affects India, thus functioning not as a mirror or metaphor, but as a part for the whole. Saleem’s literal-metaphorical relationship with post-partition India is a comparison by association, a part for the whole. This works inversely for Saleem as well, even through the logical intricacies he spells out in his modes of connection, i.e. India functions as a whole for the part. While it may seem redundant to state the relationship this way, it is necessary here to establish that the association between Saleem-India and India-Saleem is explained to function equally: what happens to Saleem also happens to India, and what happens to India also happens to Saleem.

The metonymic connections between Saleem and India are paramount to the novels, Rushdie’s, and Saleem’s self-proclaimed claims to identity. Nevertheless, this metonymic mode of identity made by metaphorical modes of connection are simultaneously paradoxical, because Saleem is not, as the reader knows, “purely” Indian. Saleem is technically half-Indian and half-British, though the very natures of such bloodlines, genealogy, authenticity, et cetera are by their place in the conversation always already questioning the establishment of such origins. As Ashcroft, Gareth, and Tiffin write, “. . . the syncretic and hybridized nature of post-colonial experience refutes the privileged position of a standard code in the language and any monocentric view of human experience” (40). Human experience via hybridic, paradoxical meaning never derives from a single perspective in postcolonial writing. For Midnight’s Children and Saleem, if there are as many versions of India as there are Indians, and if these versions all possibly, potentially, and probably clash in various and therefore paradoxical ways, then Midnight’s Children is equally a representation of postcolonial India as any other, be it written in the native or the colonizer’s language. Furthermore, this allows Midnight’s Children to
exist as both a postcolonial and postmodern novel as a paradox, something that is and is not one discourse or the other.

2.2 Paradoxical Modes of Connection

On a structural level, *Midnight’s Children* adopts many Western literary traditions. As Sabrina Hassumani writes, “Rushdie uses many genres besides myth (realism, comic, epic, science fiction, and so on)” (19), setting up literary traditions throughout the novel and then “deploying postmodern strategies, including deconstruction, [where] his systematic undercutting of all the genres he uses to tell his tale not only draws attention to his novel and its ideas as constructs, it also prevents the privileging of any one space over another. If anything is privileged, it is a notion of ‘inclusiveness’ and ‘hybridity’” (20). This deconstruction of literary traditions includes but is not limited to temporality, historiography, and allegory, a phenomenon by no means unnoticed. Srivastava specifically identifies Rushdie’s utilization of “a self-conscious use of allegory to connect the life story of the narrator Saleem Sinai with that of the Indian nation. The ‘objectivity’ of mimetic historical writing is put into question by Saleem’s new way of writing Indian history” (3).

Saleem’s autobiography is framed within the archetype of a storyteller. Saleem, while writing his story, also reads it to his one-person illiterate audience, Padma: “While at the factory, Saleem writes out his life story and reads it out loud to his friend and coworker, Padma, who is illiterate. Thus the story we receive is ostensibly the one Saleem has been recalling and retelling” (Hassumani 31). In this outer frame, Saleem often admits his mistakes in relating certain moments important to his story. For instance, when describing the death of his rival, Shiva, Saleem breaks from the narrative to explain that, “To tell the truth, I lied about Shiva’s death . . . for the first time, I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since
the past exists only in one’s memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred” (510). Thus while depicting an aesthetic self-consciousness and stylistic fragmentation, Saleem acknowledges the illusion of self-proclaimed questioning of self-representation. Saleem’s break from the tale pretends to question self-representation. By the end of the novel, this is particularly obvious since the peripheral frame of Saleem-as-storyteller is often fragmented. Yet Saleem never claims to be reliable and, in fact, makes a point of unreliability: the traditional expectations of author/narrator are purposely crushed. For instance, Saleem mistakenly marks Mahatma Gandhi’s death, and in another instance, his own birthday, responding, “And then it occurs to me that I have made another error – that the election of 1957 took place before, and not after, my tenth birthday; but although I have racked my brains, my memory refuses, stubbornly, to alter the sequence of events. This is worrying. I don’t know what’s gone wrong” (254).

This is not a broken authority that begs to be corrected, however, but one that remains in place for the sake of multifarious perspectives. Saleem, speaking to Padma, explains: “‘I told you the truth,’ I say yet again, ‘Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own’” (242). Furthermore, what historical mistakes may be found throughout the novel are also attributable to either Rushdie or Saleem, but neither can be seen at fault. Authority (insofar as the novel, the tale, the history, etc.) is meant to be questioned and remain questionable. Saleem fragments as a protagonist as the story fragments as a novel.
Rushdie’s use of a self-proclaimed unreliable narrator reveals his embrace of what would, in an imperialist, Victorian tradition, be considered unfit, improper, ineffective, or subversive. Moreover, this acknowledged unreliability is depicted as advantageous: “This system of making it up as he goes is obviously flawed, but even when he acknowledges errors like the assassination date of Mahatma Gandhi, he goes on to ask: ‘Does one error invalidate the entire fabric?’ (Midnight’s Children 198). The answer to this question, from Saleem’s perspective, is ‘no’” (Hassumani 36). Saleem’s unreliability, for all the same reasons it would be seen as unfit, improper, and/or ineffective in a traditional sense, serves his purposes in depicting a pluralistic, fragmented, relatively infinite number of possibilities within and throughout his story. In this way, Rushdie/Saleem are responding in a critical way to tradition, but not only in a Victorian sense.

Midnight’s Children begins an entire generation before Saleem Sinai is born with his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, who, after hitting “his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray . . . and at that moment, as he brushed diamonds contemptuously from his lashes, he resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man” (4). This is the beginning of Saleem’s life according to Saleem as the historian/storyteller/protagonist, as well as for Rushdie, as both narrator/protagonist and Rushdie begin the novel in this place. Yet it describes a rejection of traditional values that are/were generally seen to hold authority. Aadam maintains his faith in Allah throughout medical school, as the story continues, but here decides against it. This is the first instance in the novel of Rushdie setting up a traditional device and knocking it down, which is not only a means of using traditional narrative devices as a postcolonial means of transforming them in a hybridized way, but also a means of adhering to a postmodern discourse.
Perhaps the most strikingly obvious response to modernism in terms of identity, as Hassumani describes it, is when Saleem discovers the power of being born with the 1,001 children born between midnight and one a.m., August 15th, 1947. As Saleem explains, he had a superhuman sense of smell, but also the ability to communicate using his mind: “Telepathy, then: the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space within my head” (192). Saleem continues explaining that he could hear several different languages at once, many of which he did not understand, until he was eventually able to discern “thought-forms” beneath the voices. Of course, the most notable voices he could hear were those of “the unconscious beacons of the children of midnight, signaling nothing more than their existence, transmitting simply: ‘I.’ From far to the North, ‘I.’ And to the South East West: ‘I.’ ‘I.’ ‘And I’” (192). The “I,” if we are to take Saleem’s word for any of this, speaks directly of a single existence midst an entire nation and speaks directly to the nation manifest in Saleem. What arises is the generation of a “new” nation that is both singly and wholly a “self.”

Of course, as “. . . a postmodern text rejects the idea of progress, unity, and coherence” (Hassumani 14), the “children of midnight” are inevitably divided and stripped of their magical powers later in the novel. As Hassumani continues,

“Truth” is rejected as an impossibility while postmodern fiction consciously exposes the process that leads to a metanarrative or closure. The notion of the individual as a centered subject, an “I,” is deconstructed, and we wind up instead with a decentered subject, or a subject who is simply a network of desires (which may be conflicting), or a postmodern subject who is defined as a series of subjective positions (14).

Saleem states throughout his autobiography that he is the sum of all that came before him and that he is linked to history and to India, becoming exactly what Hassumani posits in the above
quote: a “decentered subject defined by a series of subjective positions,” here both in terms of the metadiegetic sense of storyteller-protagonist and the self as both individual and whole population. As Saleem states earlier, there are as many versions of India as there are Indians, and thus “there are many other meanings which are possible . . . The implication is that there are not absolute versions and that, in fact, all versions are constructs” (Hassumani 45-46).

Bishnupriya Ghosh’s “An Invitation to Indian Postmodernity: Rushdie’s English Vernacular as Situated Cultural Hybridity” posits, as the article title suggests, that “Rushdie’s use of English as a vernacular provides us with an example of a situated cultural hybridity that disallows Western appropriations of the postcolonial into discourses of postmodernity” (130). Ghosh’s interpretation suggests that the very nature of postcolonial writing, particularly when written in English, keeps Midnight’s Children or English-written postcolonial texts from becoming part of a Western dominated postcolonial discourse. Embracing the colonizer’s language functions to undercut resistance to neocolonialism that would inadvertently reinforce colonial residual force. Ghosh explains that his “characterization of particular English usages as Indian vernaculars circumvents the political aporias that surface in most critical discussions of postcolonial Indian literature, impasses that result from the seemingly unbridged oppositions between the Indian literature in English and 18 vernacular or bhasha literatures (130).” To Ghosh, English has become an Indian language among several Indian languages, thus adopting the colonial language into the Indian polyglot. This connects the English language to India in a rather unique way insofar as how postcolonial writing is generally approached, i.e. colonialism to postcolonialism. Rushdie’s/Saleem’s use of the English language functions to deconstruct as a paradoxical characteristic of both Saleem and India’s identity. Rushdie’s purpose in deconstructing this way creates paradoxical meaning in order to acknowledge the Othered,
debased, and marginalized. Even still, Rushdie favors the mimetic imperfections, metonymic relationships, and paradoxical identities over the perfect representations, metaphors, and traditionally accepted identities.

2.3 The Low for the Lofty: The Favor of Snotty Noses

Saleem’s special birthday and time grants him the power of telepathy, as well as, eventually, superhuman olfactory senses – a convenient gift considering that he has such a large nose. After learning how to use his telepathic powers, Saleem forms the Midnight’s Children Conference with the other magical children of midnight where he hopes to utilize their abilities using the active-literal mode of connection. However, this never happens: “‘Passive-metaphorical,’ ‘passive-literal,’ ‘active-metaphorical’: the Midnight’s Children Conference was all three; but it never became what I most wanted it to be; we never operated the first, most significant of the ‘modes of connection.’ The ‘active-literal’ passed us by” (273).

Saleem attributes the failure of the Midnight’s Children Conference to parental influence: “Children, however magical, are not immune to their parents” as “the prejudices and world-views of adults began to take over their minds” (292), thus, “in this way fulfilling the prophecy of the Prime Minister,” becoming, “in truth, a mirror of the nation; the passive-literal mode was at work, although I railed against it, with increasing desperation, and finally with growing resignation” (292). Saleem’s attempts are to create a “third principle,” a “force which drives between the horns of dilemma” by “being other, by being new” (292), all phrases used as rally cries against his greatest rival, Shiva, who retorts, “No, little rich boy; there is no third principle; there is only money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack, and right-and-left; there is only me-against-the-world!” (292-93). Saleem eventually resigns his pleas for this argument, though the modes of connection and the third principle all illustrate an urge for paradoxical meaning and identity:
“The force of this narrative lies in its rejection of simple dualistic thinking or of hegemonic configurations, particularly configurations symptomatic of the postcolonial situation” (Dayal 432). While the Midnight’s Children Conference may have failed as a result of a passive-literal mode of connection and the dualistic mindset of us-and-them stemming from prejudices, religion, class, and personality, the novel continues to encourage paradoxical, metonymic, third-principle-like connections – more reason, perhaps, as to why hyphens are necessary.

Saleem plays the role of writer and storyteller where “the double-voiced narration puts into question and ultimately delegitimitizes a hegemonic structuration of English as the original and ‘english’ as the derived form” (Dayal 433). The language Rushdie uses throughout, the hybridized “Indian-English” considered “improper” or “broken” is legitimized as a hybrid, paradoxical “english,” purposefully written in lower case to acknowledge its place as untraditional and “incorrect.” On a structural level, “the story told by Rushdie’s narrator is a counternarrative to that strange allegory [of Methwold’s estate], of the now invisible, now oppressively visible burden of the colonial ‘owner,’ a rejection of debilitating anxiety about the colonizer’s influence (431). Saleem is anxious enough as he opens his story mentioning his chronic fear of absurdity, but this does not come as a result of colonizer’s influence, but, instead, as a result of his ostensible connection with India.

For Saleem, narrative and storytelling becomes ostensibly related to preserving history. Saleem claims to be unable “to make history,” yet the story he tells/the history he writes is, by way of perspective, making history, i.e. “his story”: “In narratological terms, time admits a perspective, just as pickling alters the pickled object while seeming to observe its essential flavor” (Dayal 439). Saleem’s nose becomes more important than the magical telepathic organ; in fact, it wields a power that realizes an active-literal mode of connection that the powers of
midnight’s children were unable to harness: “pickling is inextricably linked to ‘using his nose’ as narrator. In Rushdie’s book, then, pickles are not mere food. Pickling is transformed into a metaphor for the act of narration” (Dayal 438). This is not only a matter of perspective, but also a matter of preservation, as Dayal continues: “Saleem’s story is his preserve . . . Pickling denotes the act of transforming something into something that is at once same and different. It enables an object to mature as mere vine ripening does not, and it makes it somehow more itself, as it were isolating its essence” (Dayal 438). Saleem is able to transform his history and his story into something else by way of its preservation. A cucumber becomes a pickle in the process of its preservation, creating a paradox between the cucumber and pickle; it is both a pickle and a cucumber. The same kind of change occurs to Saleem’s preservation of (his)story.

Saleem’s telepathy, the magical power allowing him to see and remember this history, is a discovery made after an (un)fortunate accident involving his mother and a washing-chest by way of his nose. As Saleem asks, “What’s in a nose? The usual answer: ‘That’s simple. A breathing apparatus; olfactory organs; hairs.’ But in my case, the answer was simpler still, although, I’m bound to admit, somewhat repellent: what was in my nose was snot” (176). Having such a large and moist nose, Saleem was often subject to ridicule by his peers: “His nose constantly ‘leaked nose goo’ – and nose goo becomes a weapon as well as a continual embarrassment, a mark of his marginality and freakishness as well as his extraordinary faculties” (Dayal 437). Because of his sinuses, he is unable to smell much of anything throughout his adolescent days: “perennial blockages doomed me to a childhood without perfumes, to days which ignored the odors of musk and chambeli and mango kasaundy and home-made ice-cream: dirty washing, too” (176). This allowed him to not notice the soiled laundry smells, making the washing-chest an ideal refuge: “I sat in the washing-chest and forgot my nose; forgot about the
climbing of Mount Everest in 1953 – when grubby Eyeslice giggled, ‘Hey men! You thin that
Tenzing could limb up Sniffer’s face?’ – and about the quarrels between my parents over my
nose, for which Ahmed Sinai never tried blaming Amina’s father: ‘Never before in my family
has there been a nose like it!’” (177). As Saleem notes in the next paragraph, “There are no
mirrors in a washing-chest; rude jokes do not enter it, nor pointing fingers” (177).

Yet, it is through his nose, particularly a pajama-cord in his left nostril, while hidden
away in his mother’s washing-chest, that he witnesses Amina Sinai whisper the name of another
man and unknowingly reveal her buttock to her son: “O horrible! – my mother, framed in
laundry and slatted wood, bends over to pick up her clothes! And there it is, searing my retina –
the vision of my mother’s rump, black as night, rounded and curved, resembling nothing on earth
so much as a gigantic, black Alfonso mango!” (184). Saleem gives himself away after “an
irreversible sniff,” after which the “Pajama-cord rises painfully half an inch further up the
nostril” (184). As Saleem attempts nasal silence,

nasal liquids are being sucked relentlessly up up up, nose-goo flowing upwards, against
gravity, against nature. Sinuses are subjected to unbearable pressure . . . until, inside the
nearlynineyearold head, something bursts. Snot rockets through a breached dam into dark
new channels. Mucus, rising higher than mucus was ever intended to rise. Waste fluid,
reaching as far, perhaps, as the frontiers of the brain . . . there is a shock. Something
electrical has been moistened . . . my nose began to sing. (184)

Despite the general disgust typically associated with things coming out of, thrust into, or inherent
within the nose, the change in Saleem’s nose opens the gateway of voices that eventually tune
into the other midnight’s children, but not before declaring these heavenly voices to his family,
which results in Ahmed Sinai slapping Saleem across the head so forcefully that it damages the hearing in his left ear.

Saleem’s nose is, magically, the source of his telepathy, yet this is only one instance of several in which his nose is significant. The snot in Saleem’s nose results in far more than just waste liquid and snot, after all, and once he discovers his telepathy, he begins to appreciate the nose and all that is contained within. The nose allows him to connect with other children of midnight, those prophesied as “the mirror of the nation.” Thus the nose and all it contains becomes a source of power and ability. In the very beginning of the novel, for instance, Saleem gives thanks for his nose: “I wish to place on record my gratitude to this mighty organ – if not for it, who would ever have believed me to be truly my mother’s son, my grandfather’s grandson? – his colossal apparatus, which was to be my birthright, too” (8). The nose, even the protuberant appendage that brings Saleem considerable embarrassment, pain, and discomfort, is also depicted as appreciating the large appendage, even if what is in a nose is, almost always, snot.

Saleem’s huge nose is genetically ascribed to William Methwold, but is also attributed to his grandfather, Aadam Aziz, who also had a very large nose that, according to Tai the boatman, carried great significance and, as Tai is also quick to emphasize, snot. As Saleem describes it, “My grandfather’s nose: nostrils flaring, curvaceous as dancers. Between them swells the nose’s triumphal arch, first up and out, then down and under, sweeping in to his upper lip with a superb and at present red-tipped flick. An easy nose to hit a tussock with” (8). This was certainly not a nose to go unnoticed. For instance, “When Naseem (Saleem’s grandmother) first sees Aadam’s face, the first thing she notices is his protuberant nose – as though it were a metonym for Aadam. Aadam’s life is inextricably tied to the history of his nose” (Dayal 436). For Saleem, Aadam’s nose is a metonym for Saleem, who is inextricably tied to history through different modes of
connection; while Saleem is discovered (much later) that he is not actually the child of Ahmed and Amina Sinai and, therefore, not the “true,” genetic grandchild of Aadam Aziz, he is accepted as part of the family. He is Saleem Sinai, the Sinai boy with his grandfather’s nose, a relation by association.

Tai the boatman adds to Aadam’s inheritance. Tai appears to be the sole contributor to teaching Aadam the importance of his nose. As Saleem writes/tells, “When young Aadam was barely past puberty the dilapidated boatman said, ‘That’s a nose to start a family on, my princeling. There’d be no mistaking whose brood they were. Mughal Emperors would have given their right hands for noses like that one. There are dynasties waiting inside it,’ – and here Tai lapsed into coarseness – ‘like snot’” (8). As Dayal explains, “Aadam would not have grasped the importance of the nose without the boatman Tai” (435). Indeed, Aadam was enchanted by Tai. Saleem recounts his infatuation with Tai’s tales as “magical talk, words pouring form him like fools’ money, past his two gold teeth, laced with hiccups and brandy, soaring up to the most remote Himalayas of the past, then swooping shrewdly on some present detail, Aadam’s nose for instance, to vivisect its meaning like a mouse” (10).

It was Tai’s ability to narrate that kept Aadam coming back to hear his stories, despite his parents’ warnings and punishments, allowing Tai to become a symbol of the base, low, and filthy. After Aadam’s return from his studies in Germany, Tai, in a form of protest against change and further Western expansion, refuses to bathe. While Aadam does not appear to take any significant offense to Tai’s subsequent offensive smell, Saleem associates with the low/impure or the unattractive through his large nose, and thereby associates with the disgusting and coarse: “Saleem’s own unattractive body, like Tai’s, identifies him with the repellent and the lowly” (Dayal 437). Saleem’s association with the “repellent and coarse,” in a sense, leads him
into the dark roads of whores, particularly “the oldest prostitute in the world, Tai Bibi, the whore
of whores, whose gifts were a mirror for my own” (364). Saleem acknowledges the similarity in
name between the boatman and the prostitute, noting, “Though she never hinted at any
connection with a Kashmiri boatmen, her name exerted the strongest of pulls” (365). His
superhuman sense of smell leads his amnesic self, nicknamed “the Buddha,” to the jungles of
what becomes Bangladesh. Once regaining his memories, Saleem becomes part of the poverty-
ridden magicians community, thrusting him into the throes of the lower classes.

Saleem’s ability to narrate, both as a means of telling and writing, further highlights his
ability to preserve his story in the same way pickling preserves a transformed thing: “Saleem the
master-pickler has little use for or interest in upholding ‘purity’ as an ideal or telos” (Dayal 440).
Furthermore, “Saleem’s revalorization of the body is an instance of his general attempt to reverse
the hegemony of the mental, intellectual, and the ‘high’ over the physical, visceral, and the ‘low.’
And he achieves this revalorization through the ingeniously polymorphous figure of the nose” (435).
Saleem’s ability to preserve, re-member, and narrate all revolves around his ability to
embrace the base, low, and filthy things associated with the body. The power of a nose is not
then connected to the magic of telepathy as Saleem discovers. Saleem’s stuffed nose, though
always dripping, blocks his sense of smell through the entirety of his telepathic abilities. It is
only when the nose cannot freely run where his telepathic ability to communicate with the
children of midnight functions. After losing his telepathic powers once his sinuses are drained,
his now open nose becomes an organ with a hypersensitive, magical sense of smell. While this
does not allow him to communicate with the children of midnight any longer, he is able to smell
both tangible and abstract things, e.g. spices and emotions. Saleem’s ability is then transformed
from that of telepathy to that of “Using my nose (because, although it has lost the powers which
enabled it, so recently, to make history, it has acquired other, compensatory gifts) – turning it inwards, I’ve been sniffing out the atmosphere in my grandfather’s house . . .” (Midnight’s Children 54).

Saleem explicitly states the fear of being meaningless midst the oncoming tale of a new nation already old that, perhaps, is also beginning to crack and crumble: “I must work fast . . . if I am to end up meaning – yes, meaning – something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity” (4). Yet Rushdie’s/Saleem’s attempt to establish meaning is clearly not something that comes easy for the postcolonial.

Please believe that I am falling apart. I am not speaking metaphorically; nor is this the opening gambit of some melodramatic, riddling, grubby appeal for pity. I mean quite simply that I have begun to crack all over like an old jug – that my poor body . . . has started coming apart at the seams. In short, I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment . . . I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious, dust. This is why I have resolved to confide in paper, before I forget. (We are a nation of forgetters.) (Midnight’s Children 36)

The fragmentation is present in different instances, including in/on Saleem-the-character, Saleem-the-writer/storyteller, Saleem-India, India-Saleem (their “lives” are inseparable), Saleem-history, history-Saleem (“handcuffed to history”), etc. Where Saleem cracks, dissolves, or fragments, so do the things attached to him. The connection between Saleem and these other things is also fragmented in the sense that the connection(s) move in different directions at different angles.
Mishra and Hodge claim that all postcolonial identity is built upon a model of metonym rather than a model of metaphor. Metaphor fails as a mode of identity because, in identifying with the representation of the culture, the hegemonic forces established in effect of Western invasion and imperialism are reinforced. In other words, keeping the metaphor of a colonized identity representing an imperial ideal strengthens and confirms the presumption that such identities needed representation. Bhabha’s explanation of the transition from metaphorical to metonymical modes of identity takes place by way of this necessarily faulty mimicry. Like Ahmed Aziz, such mimetic attempts of representation are always already faulty, bent, or warped in some way or another. Representation for the othered then can only stand as part-for-whole, and because that representation is only perceived marginally/peripherally, a metaphorical mode of identity is inherently blurry and, like the representation itself, inherently flawed or arbitrary.

Saleem’s nose, then, is far more than a representation of India, but a part for the whole. This is made explicit during Saleem’s day in school when his teacher introduced the wildly absurd but poignantly noted lesson in “human geography” where Saleem’s nose, by way of his teacher, is likened to a map, the Indian continent seen in the nose, Pakistan seen in the left knob of his skull and Bangladesh in the right growth of his skull, and the snot dripping off the tip of his nose as Sri Lanka. Of course, Saleem as an individual is also part for the whole of India making him far more metonymical in connection to India and his Indian identity than mere representation. Such a metonymical connection does not come without a deep past either. As a matter of inheritance, Saleem is both connected to his grandfather as to India. It is through the nose that Saleem is, for a time, able to communicate with those associated with the hope of an independent nation, and it is his nose that enables him to preserve the subsequent history of his life, both in terms of pickling in a metaphorical sense and archiving in a narrative sense.
Saleem’s revalorization of the corporeal and the low, which is also Rushdie’s, further establishes Saleem’s metonymical mode of identity. As the third chapter will argue, the metonymical connections Saleem shares with India also extend to Padma, his son, and Rushdie’s readers because, simply put, we all have and have to deal with snot, waste, the repugnant, et cetera. After all, we all have noses. Thus the connections Saleem makes and the connections Rushdie is attempting to make extend far beyond the elements of a novel, i.e. theme, plot, character, style, et cetera. The ostensible connections Saleem portrays throughout his story are also his readers’ connections, relationships that are paradoxical rather than axiomatic, associative rather than representational. By establishing such connections with an audience in this way, Rushdie reveals that metonym is essential to this novel as it is significant to Saleem’s/India’s identity. Paradoxically, the metonymical connections are and are not limited to Indian/postcolonial identity because of the language in which it is written, which allows Rushdie to speak to a global audience that can associatively relate to Saleem and the novel. As the next chapter will discuss in greater detail, the metonymical connection Rushdie creates in Midnight’s Children functions as a means of inducing empathy from the audience. David Foster Wallace also undertakes this project in his writings, though he will prove to be far more explicit in his intention in what he presents with his readers.

3 METONYMY, SUFFERING, AND SHIT

3.1 Metonymy by Identity

This chapter will focus on three texts by David Foster Wallace: “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” “E Unibus Pluram,” and “The Suffering Channel.” Wallace identifies a need for metonymical connection by describing a postmodern condition overwhelmed by addiction to excess and irony to the point that it generates apathy and disconnectedness. “The
Suffering Channel” utilizes the base, low, and typically disgusting so as to depict a wide spectrum of suffering; through both the taboos of waste and the broad notions of suffering, Wallace attempts to establish metonymical connections between character and reader. As a result, the desired affect is an empathetic connection, which is necessarily an associative connection. In this regard Wallace reflects Rushdie’s metonymical agenda.

David Foster Wallace’s agenda with regard to metonymy is very similar to that of Rushdie in that both writers are attempting to establish some form of identity. Wallace describes his generation as a bored and lonely audience trained to consume the easily digestible entertainment of television: “I think it’s impossible to spend that many slack-jawed, spittle-chinned, formative hours in front of commercial art without internalizing the idea that one of the main goals of art is simply to entertain, give people sheer pleasure” (Burns 24). Implicitly, however, Wallace also suggests that television viewing also demonstrates a desire for connection. For Wallace, creating connection becomes the purpose of the fiction writer, who must make people feel something, creating some sense of empathy in the reader: “We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy’s impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters’ pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own” (Burns 22). In this way, the fiction writer is one who creates empathy by creating some empathetic (i.e. metonymical) relationship with the audience, not as a representation of nature (i.e. mimesis or metaphor), but as a human association of one person to another. As Wallace notes in his interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993, “If what’s always distinguished bad writing – flat characters, a narrative world that’s clichéd and not recognizably human, etc. – is also a description of today’s world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world” (Burns 26). Wallace suggests that “bad writing” is often equated with
mimicking a bad world. The imitation is bad, however, because it is essentially flat and cliché,
implies that the better the mimesis of the world, the worse and less human the writing becomes.
By extension then, “good writing” is something that does not mimic the world around it, but does
something different. Something more is needed beyond the direct comparisons seen in mimesis,
and my argument is that a metonymic connection resulting in empathy is characteristic of the
good writing Wallace produces.

Besides promoting empathy, post-postmodern identity of they type created by Wallace
directly links to contemporary postcolonial/postmodern identity through a metonymical model.
Both the lonely, bored American identity bombarded with “simply too many choices” (“E
Unibus Pluram” 191) and the stripped, mimetic postcolonial identity both consciously and
unconsciously considered “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, Locations 122) in relation to
their resemblances to the former colonizers, share the same identity model: a relation of self by
association.

Contemporary American fiction and identity, at least insofar as it is defined as a
generation bombarded with too many choices, mirrors a postcolonial metonymical identity:
Wallace relies upon metonymy in establishing identity in much the same way Rushdie’s does.
Through his critique of American fiction and the effects of television on a post-postmodern
audience, Wallace’s notion of identity in a post-postmodern society inherently depends upon a
metonymical model of empathy. Throughout Wallace’s writing, empathy is the emotion by
which our contemporary society derives meaning from a poststructuralist condition of having too
many choices while the same society paradoxically shrugs off the effort altogether. Wallace
notes in several places throughout various interviews, for instance, that the number of television
channels continues to grow throughout his career; as the choices continue to multiply, our
addiction to viewing television becomes strongly reinforced. In Wallace’s view, American society is addicted to television: “one’s relationship to it lies on that downward-sloping continuum between liking it a little too much and downright needing it . . . [where] (1) it causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as relief from the very problems it causes” (193). The numbing effect, on the audience, of excessive choices and televisual stimulation leaves the addict apathetic about the addiction of viewing television while also hopelessly subsumed by the act. Wallace’s critique of postmodernism includes a critique of the malignant addiction Americans develop in watching television.

Wallace is also concerned with excessive irony; to Wallace, irony has become an overused, clichéd trope that has also become an addiction. Irony has become the substance and the process of addiction. A text without irony, for instance, presumes a disconnect from audiences, yet, if an audience is addicted to irony, the ironic absence of irony simultaneously reinforces the addiction. This is not to say that Wallace avoids irony in his writing as a means of resisting irony; he most certainly incorporates irony in many of his texts. In many ways, however, Wallace is attempting to ironize his reader’s addiction to irony, subverting the reader’s attention to the ironic connections s/he maintains. As the next section will discuss, Wallace attributes his addiction to irony with television.

3.2 The Postmodern Condition

I find it somewhat intriguing that the title of Wallace’s essay on American fiction and television, taken from Michael Sorkin’s “Faking It,” is the reversal of the same Latin phrase found on the American dollar bill. It hangs on a banner above the eagle on what is generally considered the backside of the note within the national seal reading “e pluribus unum.” The translation reads “from the many, one.” The idea behind this phrase is a rather easy one when
considering the fifty states (many) creating a single nation (the one). However, at the time this phrase was decided upon for the dollar bill in 1776 (“U.S. Department of Treasury”), unity was not exactly the fulcrum of American identity. In fact, the American Civil War called this very phrase into question almost a century later. This phrase, insofar as American identity is concerned, has always been fraught with controversy.

It may not be surprising that Wallace’s title suggests something directly critical of American identity by reversing the phrase from “*e pluribus unum,*” (“from many, one”) to “*e unibus pluram,*” (“from one, many”). Wallace’s phrase suggests a deeper sense of disunity wrought by the very adoption of this motto. Out of a postmodern sense of unity emerges a mass of individuals where each dollar bill is folded, wrinkled, and discolored in its own way to form an identity that falls on the double-edged sword of cliché: each individual is unique just like everyone else.

Describing how and where this sense of disunity develops by way of an entire culture obsessed with self-referential independence is part of the task Wallace takes on in “E Unibus Pluram.” This disunity is illustrated through the effects television has on a lonely American society. As Wallace claims, “television’s whole raison is reflecting what people want to see. It’s a mirror . . . what we as Audience want to see ourselves as.” (152). The mirror’s reflection eventually becomes a double reflection, in a sense, as though watching what the glowing television screen pushes through the glass to the viewer subliminally distracts the viewer from the viewer’s reflection; television is influencing the viewer by convincing viewers of a false agency, that they willfully and independently choose to watch the television. As Wallace writes, “all available evidence suggests that the Audience really craves sameness but thinks, deep down, that it ought to crave novelty . . . [T]his tension in the Audience between what we do want and
what we think we ought to want has been television’s breath and bread” (165). The audience thinks it wants individuality because televisions sells the audience that idea; the audience, buying into the idea, watches more television, bringing into play the paradox of the individual forming the mass, or from the one, many: “No one and everyone is at fault for the fact that television started gleaning rebellion and cynicism as the hip, upscale, baby-boomer imago populi. But the harvest has been dark: the forms of our best rebellious art have become mere gestures, shticks, not only sterile but perversely enslaving” (184). Furthermore, “television has become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it. It’s not that charges of nonconnection have become untrue. It’s that any such connection has become otiose” (160).

The television works as a mirror, essentially telling the viewer what s/he wants to see and be. In this way, television could be seen to work similarly to the way the colonizers function as “civilized” society in the colonial setting; in order to be “civilized,” natives must assimilate and adopt the colonizers’ ways. [T]elevision also toys with notions of voyeurism: “the television screen affords access only one way . . . We can see Them; They can’t see Us. We can relax, unobserved, as we ogle” (152). Wallace takes this one step further to claim that “this is why television also appeals so much to lonely people . . . Lonely people tend rather to be lonely because they decline to bear the emotional costs associated with being around other humans. They are allergic to people” (152). This allergy, Wallace describes, is voyeuristic, though not voyeurism, and he differentiates between the two by noting that those we see on television know we-the-viewers are watching. We are thus watching a performance: “We’re not voyeurs here at all. We’re just viewers. We are the Audience, megametrically many, though most often we watch alone. E unibus pluram” (153).
Wallace, at least in 1993 when “E Unibus Pluram” was first published, thinks Americans are lonely, and that that loneliness derives from an enormous consumption of television viewing: “[T]he effect of this much television on American society is that people are watching people knowing they are being watched. This causes problems for the American fiction writer, for “the persons we young fiction writers and assorted shut-ins most study, feel for, feel through are, by virtue of a genius for feigned unself-consciousness, fit to stand gazes” (155). It becomes difficult for the fiction-ogler to ogle when those being ogled are viewers expecting viewership. The “Audience,” in Wallace’s sense, expects to watch, and the enjoyment generated is a form of watching themselves watch. This effect eventually results in a mass of self-ogling oglers: “We spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. We start to ‘feel’ ourselves feeling, yearn to experience ‘experience’” (160).

The notion of television’s enslaving and reinforcing influence on the relationship of an audience malignantly addicted to viewing prompts Wallace to question “TV’s institutionalization of hip irony . . . to American literary fiction” (181). He asks, “Culture wise, shall I spend much of your time pointing out the degree to which televisual values influence the contemporary . . . delusion that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive?” (181). In other words, a viewer can be cynical while naïve about the fact that their cynicism is predictable. When irony is always expected, the viewer’s reliance on it makes her/him predictable while reinforcing the very goal of television: to be liked by everyone. Thus the idea that the viewer is always informed and smart but never naïve forms the basis of a widespread contemporary delusion.

Wallace’s point regarding television and American society relies upon one of the major components of his thesis, that “The nexus where television and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony” (161). Television’s effect on the audience is directly related to American
perception and reception of art and, more specifically, fiction: “if realism called it like it saw it, metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it. This high-cultural postmodern genre, in other words, was deeply informed by the emergence of television. And American fiction remains informed by TV . . .” (161). To Wallace, metafiction is an effect of popular television where viewers viewing so much begin watching themselves watch; “The emergence of . . . metafiction in the American sixties was and is hailed by academic critics as a radical aesthetic, a whole new literary form unshackled from the canonical cinctures of narrative and mimesis and free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious meditation on aboutness” (160).

Wallace takes up the task of confronting the postmodern novel/metafiction in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way,” a short story that responds directly to John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse,” and revolves around the character of Mark Nechtr. Nechtr is, for the majority of the story, unable to produce any work in his graduate creative writing class at the East Chesapeake Tradeschool Writing Program. The tale describes Mark, along with a fellow student Drew-Lynn Eberhardt (a self-professed postmodernist) are heading to a massive reunion of all actors and actresses who have ever played a role in a McDonald’s commercial advertisement. Wallace approaches metafiction here as an ontological dominant – that is, in reference to the nature of existence as the focal point of all metafiction – but is not willing to let go of the problem of the center of consciousness we find in Modernist fiction. The fiction that acknowledges itself focuses on itself as fiction. As a kind of manifesto to Wallace’s relationship to postmodernism, he attempts to define metafiction through a postmodern critique, or a post-postmodern lens by creating another story within the story.

The story-within-the-story, i.e. metadiegetic story, produced in final pages of “Westward,” which is arguably Mark’s (or anyone’s, including Wallace’s), is thematically girded
by a theme of guilt and betrayal (or the lack thereof in the character’s, Dave, perspective). This metadiegetic narrative stands to extend beyond the minimalist, postmodern, and metafictional. While an obvious metafiction takes place between “Westward’s” narrator and the construction of Mark’s story, the story itself is arguably not metafictional. Instead, the metafiction is placed within the paradigm of a fiction-writing workshop, which keeps the mirror-on-mirror process of a Bathian metafictional funhouse from continuing. Mark’s story creates a metadiegetic stop to the metafictional process, and the narrative itself, which is neither minimalist nor metafictional, produces televisual allusions meant to betray the reader/audience into empathizing with Dave the protagonist. Both narrator and narrative are blurred as in metafiction, thus blurring “Westward” within a metafictional convention; the narration breaks what in television and film refers to as the “fourth wall” to directly address the audience/reader.

By the end of the story, we have the notion that we know who the narrator is, which problematizes the notion of metafiction/fiction. There is an implied participant in the Ambrose creative writing workshop, who may be Mark, may be Dave, or may be neither. The sign that Mark has written the story about himself and D.L. appears in the final lines with, “Jesus, Sweets, listen” (372). It seems that Mark is writing a story about his experience and the story that he wants to construct. That one very tenuous connection suggests that the entire story is focused on Mark’s center of consciousness. The running theme throughout the story is Mark’s ability to produce, though it is made abundantly clear that he is not producing. Similarly, Tom Sternbergh highlights a parallel between Mark’s production (or lack thereof) and bowel movements. Mark’s inability to write mirrors Tom’s inability to defecate, and Tom’s anxiety at being recognized as a public defecator may also be juxtaposed against Mark’s inability to write.
Tom Sternbergh’s inability to defecate is a crucial link between Wallace’s earlier work in “Westward” and his more celebrated work in Oblivion – specifically in “The Suffering Channel.” “Westward,” the more obscure of the two stories, reveals a link between the act of production and defecation that Wallace continues to revisit. Notwithstanding, Tom is described as having an eye peering backwards (a fairly obvious representation of metafiction), a nasty cyst in the middle of his forehead, and an oral obsession with 100-length cigarettes. He is barely able to release a bowel movement in a public restroom for fear of someone (particularly Mark) realizing that he is defecating, exemplifying his fear of embodiment. We also know that he is highly claustrophobic, a fact that becomes particularly obvious in the scene in the car. All of these traits suggest that, if metafiction serves as the platform upon which fiction turns the focus back in on itself (like Tom Sternbergh’s eye), then Wallace means to turn the attention onto the nature of metafiction. In “Westward,” Wallace is relying upon an audience’s expectation of metafict ional irony so as to stop the fiction from turning in on itself and, instead, reveal how the reader expects the metaficti onal turn. In light of Wallace’s critique of television and its effects on the viewer, Wallace means to shut off the television’s power so as to bring attention to the reflection of the viewer reflected in the glass screen. In another sense, Wallace ironizes metaficti onal irony.

Wallace appropriates ironic self-reference/metafiction in “Westward” through the spin. The metaphor of moving forward without ever getting there is like the spin inside the spin: “You stare into a spinning thing, stare hard: you can see something inside the spin sputter, catch, and seem to spin backwards inside the spin, against the spin. Sometimes. Sometimes maybe four different spins, each opposite its own outside” (“Westward” 245). There is a negation of the negation that turns into an affirmation, a double negative to create a positive. Wallace is trying to get readers/viewers to think about what metafiction is by saying this is not not metafiction. This
negation, that of what is not not, takes a long time, but it is the process of taking us through that which, to Mark and by extension Wallace, is not only what the fiction should do, but also what the funhouse is made for – finding some positive principle in the double negative. Fiction is only fiction by virtue of it not being nonfiction; the true is nothing else and never more than a claim articulated in language; and all truth claims are, thus, fictional/unreal, allowing the fiction writer/artist to lie with a good conscience: “The liar is a person who uses the valid designation, the words, in order to make something which is unreal appear to be real” (Nietzsche 115).

The spin Wallace uses to disrupt conventional notions of metafiction and fiction in a televisual society also addresses levels of narration. This narratological focus is relevant because it rather explicitly makes metonymical, associative connections between writer, reader, and character. If diegesis is the telling of a narrative, mimesis is the showing thereof, hence functioning as an opposite or contrast to diegesis. Diegesis has also been extended to the extradiegetic (understood as the level of narration), the diegetic (the level of characters’ thoughts and actions), and the metadiegetic (the story-within-a-story level where a diegesis occurs within another diegesis) (Genette). Wallace abruptly moves the focus away from the extradiegetic and into the diegetic in order to draw attention to the fact that his story is, indeed, not metafiction. By the end of “Westward,” the reader has experienced all levels of diegesis, reading metafiction within the spin, and negating the metafiction to fiction thus metafictionally negating metafiction. This results in a sort of reader betrayal. As the final major paragraph and subsequent lines, again noting the tenuous suggestion Mark Nechtr as the diegesis operator, tells the reader, “Relax. Lie back. I want nothing from you. Lie back. Relax. Quality soil washes right out. Lie back. Open. Face directions. Look. Listen. Use ears I’d be proud to call our own. Listen to the silence behind the engines’ noise. Jesus, Sweet, listen. Hear it? It's a love song. For whom? You are loved”
(379). These final lines express attention to the reading audience, if anything, by asking “For whom?” and in the unpunctuated, presumed answer, “You are loved.” These final lines function as Wallace’s full stop to metafiction and double-negative affirmation; the reading audience, in reading, is forced to ask to whom the question is asked and to whom “You” refers.

If an American audience is united by what is seen rather than what is actually felt or experienced, then a post-postmodern response must acknowledge the failure of metafiction to step outside of itself as object. Feeling and experience are represented on television and related to as such by the audience; only by viewing instances of feeling/experience are things felt/experienced: “Americans seemed no longer united so much by common feelings as by common images: what binds us became what we stood witness to” (“E Unibus Pluram” 166). Furthermore, the connection developed with others by what we have seen uniting us is what both creates the illusion of agency and independence and categorizes the mass as a collected whole, allowing supposedly apathetic viewer at full attention to the screen to shrug off of such attention while never averting his/her gaze: “The crowd is now, paradoxically, both the ‘herd’ in contrast to which the viewer’s distinctive identity is to be defined, and the impassive witnesses whose sight alone can confer distinctive identity. The lone viewer’s isolation in front of his furniture is implicitly applauded . . . and yet also implicated as threatening, confusing . . .” (176). The viewer/reader can only take these postmodern characteristics at face value, as modes and means of “kissing their own spines. Fucking themselves” (“Westward 332).

Furthermore, if we are to break away from this symptom of postmodernism and find meaning in the results, then American identity will conform to a metonymical model where – much like the allusions now uniting us – unity, purpose, and meaning will derive from a relation by association, even if just for a one-night stand. Wallace is “convinced that television lies, with
a potency somewhere between symptom and synecdoche, behind a genuine crisis for U.S. culture and lit today” (162), and that “In our post-’50, inseparable-from-TV association pool, brand loyalty is synecdochic of identity, character” (167). Wallace wants his generation to relate to one another by more than what we have borne witness to and remain genuinely loyal to ourselves as something more than what television tells us we are. Our society is addicted to television and must acknowledge this crisis nearer synecdoche than symptom, as something associated with addiction. Our identities fall into a metonymical model like that of synecdoche – part for the whole – allowing, perhaps with a little more effort, an identity in something associative rather than representational. Essentially, the synecdochic description Wallace uses to describe American symptoms of loneliness and sadness is the model by which American society should model itself.

3.3 Disgust and Artistic Metonymy

Wallace’s self-reflexive critique of metafiction and thus postmodernism represented in “Westward” creates an identity for the fiction writer and, by extension, a contemporary audience. We see this in both Mark Nechtr (fiction writer) and Tom Sternbergh (with an eye turned in on itself). “The Suffering Channel” explicitly places artistic identity and a struggling American identity within a metonymical model, offering some form of choice within an excessive multitude of choices: “Wallace’s fictional subjects are sutured into recursive cycles and feedback loops; there is an analogy with tennis where, as the academy coach says, the idea is ‘to send from yourself what you hope will not return’” (Giles 339). Characters within “The Suffering Channel,” and specifically those working at Style, are literally caught within a loop of magazine issue circulation positioned towards a constant recognition or re-recognition of suffering (the Suffering Channel), soft news (popular news), and subversion (the Ads All the Time Channel).
The very opening lines of the story, “‘But they’re shit.’ ‘And yet at the same time they’re art.’ ‘No, they’re literally shit is literally what they are’ (238), frame the argument. This particular conversation takes place between the protagonist, Skip Atwater, and an associate editor at Style, a magazine housed in 1 World Trade Center in New York (241). The story is littered with references to the September 11 attacks, meant to suggest a sort of inevitable oblivion: “Its media system of waste recycling ensures that its own structural base – the very architectural form that supports it – will be reduced to rubble, to a void” (Banner).

It is quickly apparent on reading the first pages of the story that its major concern is with the differentiating characteristics of “good” versus “bad” art, or in the terms posited by the story itself, art versus “shit.” According to the OED, “shit” is a part of speech than can be possessive, plural, singular, literal, figurative, compounded, intransitive, transitive, and interjectionary. Among an impressively lengthy entry of three major forms including but not limited to nouns, adjective, verbs, and interjectionary, “shit” refers to and/or incorporates vocational and topical relations to agriculture, horticulture, science, veterinarian science, medicine, anatomy, pharmacology, pathology, military, history, religion, ontology, poetry, and literature. Regionally, the word “shit” spans from North America, Australia, Britain, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United States, where most of the categories and uses for the term or phrases are used and, more often than not, it is described as “coarse slang,” “colloquial and slang,” and “derogatory.” While “The Suffering Channel” does not use “shit” in all these ways, the idea that literal shit can also be literal art begs questions about what distinguishes the disgusting from the fascinating and plays on the several of the conceptual registers mentioned above.

The central figure in “The Suffering Channel” is that of the suffering artist. Brint Moltke is suffering, presumably by way of the trauma he experienced as a child. Skip and Amber are
soon to force him into producing his art/shitting in front of a camera, thus augmenting Brint’s
childhood trauma, all for the sake of watching Brint suffer. Skip’s role in forcing Brint to suffer
is highlighted by the words “Help me!” written with shit in a hallway near Skip’s hotel room.
There are obvious resonances with Kafka’s “The Hunger Artist” (Staes 462) in which the artist
makes himself suffer as a spectacle, troubling the lines between what is fascinating enough to
attract an audience and what is repulsive enough to drive that very audience away (Staes 462).
The artist is forced to sacrifice some form of himself or his art in order to maintain the art, but
this is fraught with difficulties in terms of the art and the artist: “The artist as a philosopher of
constraint . . . marginalizes himself as a social deviant. Yet this does not turn his work into a
detached celebration of art for art’s sake” (462). It is the suffering artistic theme that connects
Brint and Skip as artists; Brint suffers via trauma, whereas Skip suffers via injured knee: they are
both suffering artists, but it is never made clear whether they suffer because they are artists or
whether they are artists because they suffer. The question is meant to linger.

Wallace is constantly toying with meaning represented in the word (sign/signifier) “shit”
in contrast to the literal thing (signified) “shit” throughout this short story. The implication is that
“shit” as a sign/signifier is boundless: “shit” can mean any number of different things,
characterized by a wide spectrum of a few positive or several negative implications. This is
where the abjection of the signified is at the very least placed into certain question as implied in
the opening lines; yet, the implicit and the explicit, much like the lofty and the low, or the
infinite and infinitesimal, are often joined/hybridized throughout Wallace’s work.

As Skip mentions in the very beginning of the story, “They’re literally shit” (238): the art
Brint Moltke produces is not just “shit” in the figurative sense, but also shit in the literal sense.
As a material, it is literally shit, but as a form of art, it is in conflict with what is “artistic” insofar
as the figurative form of “bad” art is generally considered, pejoratively, “shit” (here in the figurative sense). To see the figurative made literal while also artistic in its capacity to simultaneously fascinate and disgust lays the very platform on which Wallace claims that the shit or “shit” must be produced regardless of the pieces’ literal or figurative reception. Wallace, we may assume, is also questioning the status of his own art/fiction as good “shit.”

Skip Atwater’s conversation with his editor in the opening of the story is, in fact, less to do with art or shit and, instead depicts a frustration that extends far deeper than the specific assignment to cover the shit artist. Skip’s annoyance is more motivated by his reputation for being a push-over, and it is in his failure to be more assertive and stubborn that contributes to stagnant title and position at Style magazine: “At root, his reputation with staffers and interns alike was based in this: his consistent failure to be an asshole. Which could, of course, be a double-edged sword. He was seen as having roughly the self esteem of a prawn” (298). “The Suffering Channel” raises the question of what exactly an “asshole” does that Skip cannot do by avoiding this sort of reputation. In this case, it is both shit and art. Atwater eventually becomes an “asshole” (figuratively) by, in large part, situating himself in the place of Mr. B.M. The key moment of transforming into an “asshole,” for Skip Atwater, is when he gets the “help me” script in his hotel. Atwater is then placed in the position of having to acknowledge that whatever sort of trauma is producing the shit-art is something inside Moltke that Moltke cannot control, as well as something causing pain and suffering. This is Skip’s opportunity to help Brint, to keep him from having to display his traumatic pain to the world; but he does not, and, instead, forces him into a position where he must reveal his talent to the world, thus adding to his suffering. The sign of his transformation comes from the “strange abdomen circle or hole that [Mr. Moltke] formed with his hands” (312). By the end of the story, Skip has adopted this symbol, “hand folded
monkishly over his abdomen” (329) just before Mr. B.M. is to watch himself, via camera, produce his art into a translucent commode.

We never see, as readers, what Brint Moltke produces; we are not encouraged to confront the possibility here that Mr. B.M. shits, plays with, and sanitizes his own shit; we are led to entertain the perhaps less disgusting fantasy that he deposits these shit-figurines as is. Wallace does not want us to imagine how this is actually produced and, instead, maintains the option to buy into the miraculous notion that the objects come out the way Mr. B.M. claims they do – again, as is. The fascination with Moltke nevertheless derives from his claim that he miraculously produces the pieces as is, and such attention to his art/shit would perhaps be far less interesting if he shaped the pieces of shit with his fingers. Either way, it does not seem to be an important a point that we are never drawn to this question; after all, most artists prefer to produce in private, and Brint Moltke is no different. Regardless of his preferences as an artist, his trauma is commoditized, marginalizing him as an object rather than a subject.

3.4 Marriage of Metonymy

Wallace’s attempts to metonymically connect with readers in “The Suffering Channel,” and Rushdie’s depiction of paradoxical identity throughout Midnight’s Children, reveal a common set of concerns. Metonymy throughout “The Suffering Channel” links fiction and identity, whereas the links between the fiction writer/artist and society resides within the debate regarding what constitutes good art from bad art, high art from low art, or, in Skip Atwater’s case, “good” “shit” from (“bad”) “shit.” This is easily applied to Saleem Sinai, both biographer and storyteller who, in his own ways, is, like Brint Moltke, an artist; both Saleem and Moltke are associated with waste and the corporeal in different ways.
Rushdie reveals the failure of mimesis throughout *Midnight’s Children*, and Wallace likens metafiction to turning a mirror back in on itself. When applied to television cameras, as Wallace does, the mirror effect creates the image of a monitor turning back in on itself and producing “feedback glare” or “searing and amorphous light.” The spewing glare and light that shines back at Brint Moltke at the end of “The Suffering Channel” is all that remains as a product of his suffering. However, while metafiction turns the mirror back in on itself by essentially absorbing itself for the sake of itself, “The Suffering Channel” functions to do the opposite; the story is attempting to relate to an audience by associatively connecting with them via suffering, as well to the artist’s/artist’s identity/identities. The mirror has been handed to the postmodern critic and is engulfed by feedback glare where the artist her/himself is only commoditized and consumed.

Moltke’s identity, commoditized by the colonizing television, recalls the closing passaged in *Midnight’s Children* where the protagonist-narrator breaks into a million pieces and is consumed by “the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes” (533). The whirlpool metaphor relates to Wallace’s notions of a self-subsuming text and feedback glare insofar as there is a center at which some action occurs, i.e. the whirlpool’s subsequent vacuum or the television’s spewing frame. Where Rushdie’s whirlpool serves metaphorically to represent the narrator-narrator and, metadiegetically, all of post-occupation India, Wallace’s feedback glare is both metaphorical and metonymical: it comparatively represents the metafictional elements implied by way of what constitutes art as Art, while also posing as a hole through which something is produced. However, the feedback glare is metonymical in that it compares to a television as well, the act of watching television, or even the production of television; the relation is an association more than just a representation. The “searing and amorphous light” comes through a rectangular
hole or through what Wallace describes it in “E Unibus Pluram,” through furniture, which is now focused on another person’s suffering rather than his artistic production. The suffering itself is viewed as sheer entertainment seen through everyday furniture in a society Wallace contends is also suffering.

What we find taken from Brint Moltke at the end of “The Suffering Channel” is not only any sliver of human subjectivity as a person with agency, but also a complete lack of relation from those producing the show: “There is no subjectivity to these characters: instead, they play out scripts already created for them . . .” (Banner). For instance, Brint Moltke’s commodification, while clearly fulfilling its role as part of Moltke’s purpose as a character, expands far beyond his character as well, permeating most aspects of our culture, even in academia. As Wallace states, “Academia and commercial culture have somehow become these gigantic mechanisms of commodification that drain the weight and color out of even the most radical new advances” (McCaffery 31). Wallace goes on to note that what’s been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but also to redeem. You’ve got to understand that this stuff has permeated the culture. It’s become our language; we’re so in it we don’t even see that it’s one perspective, one among many possible ways of seeing. Postmodern irony became our environment. (49)

Skip and those involved with Brint Moltke at Style magazine depict this kind of objectification for the sake of commodity, i.e. a group of hollowed subjects playing their roles accordingly. If fiction is meant to “no longer make the strange familiar but make the familiar strange again,”
McCaffery 38), then perhaps Wallace presents these characters in association with a culture permeated by such hollow entertainment.

Wallace’s use of metonym throughout “The Suffering Channel” recalls the metonymical struggle for identity similar to the struggles for identity in a postcolonial sense depicted in Midnight’s Children. A post-postmodern metonymical identity present throughout Wallace’s writing and interviews creates the juxtaposition of a postcolonial quest for meaning and identity exemplified in Saleem Sinai’s narrative/history/autobiography. While metonym, a figure of speech, only plays as a “model towards the construction of meaning” (Mishra and Hodge 287), the implications describe the nature of a changing fiction, identity, and era that Rushdie and Wallace reveal to be far more allusive and worldwide than their respective conceptual styles.

CONCLUSION

Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children and David Foster Wallace’s “The Suffering Channel” each focus on the impure, the base and low, and the parts of us we often avoid out of embarrassment or shame, and rightly so. As Kwame Appiah writes in Cosmopolitanism, “Cultural purity is an oxymoron. The odds are that, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more” (113). Because elements of disgust like snot and shit are common to every person, the metonymical connections are made, even imaginatively, with characters experiencing and suffering. Midnight’s Children, while typically associated with the postcolonial and therefore the mimetic and metaphorical connections in a colonial sense, develops a metonymical mode of identity through the bodily and synecdochic connections; likewise, “The Suffering Channel,” while typically associated with postmodern modes of identity
and therefore mimetic and metafictional connections in a criticism of postmodernism, develops a metonymical mode of identity through the corporeal and empathetic connections. Both writers imply, then, that through associating with these lowly acts and realities, empathy is possible. Rushdie and Wallace both produce different fictions for different reading audiences, but both are concerned with developing metonymic modes of identity despite the obvious distinctions between them.

Despite the shared characteristics between Rushdie and Wallace, or postcolonialism and post-postmodernism, to suggest that postcolonial identity and American identity are synonymous would be a mistake. In fact, it would suggest something along the lines of a colonizing effect to say so: that the American consumerist and excessive lazy gaze of television sets somehow equates to the figurative and often literal rape of a colonized nation is neither the premise nor the outcome of this argument. However, it can easily be said that some trauma has occurred in both of these entities in some way leaving the audience to face a failing mimetic/metaphorical identity and, in effect, adopt a metonymical identity inducing empathy. In other words, this is not an identity contest, and I am not suggesting that one identity is more important, significant, or relevant than another, nor even attempting to mistakenly imply that one identity need be humbled beneath the history of another. Simply put, identity in a post-postmodern era relates to identity in a post-occupational postcolonial era as well, and the bridging characteristic between them is metonym.

There is also something to be said of the shared characteristics between postcolonialism and post-postmodernism; Rushdie and Wallace reliance upon metonymy as a means of connecting and identifying with their respective generations suggests that postcolonialism and post-postmodernism have more in common than what might be expected. Perhaps there is more
to be said of Mishra and Hodge’s notion, mentioned in the introduction, that the postcolonial subsumes the postmodern. If that were the case, then there may be logical precedence to finding typically postcolonial characteristics arising out of respectively postmodern or post-postmodern fiction. This notion is something for a larger project, but would certainly correspond to linking metonym as a predominant characteristic of postcolonial and post-postmodern literature.

As Wallace’s fiction implies and as he actually states, “It seems like the big distinction between good art and so-so art lies somewhere in the art’s heart’s purpose, the agenda of the consciousness behind the text. It’s got something to do with love. With having the discipline to talk out of the part of yourself that can love instead of the part that just wants to be loved” (Burns 50). Wallace vies for the members of a malignantly addicted culture to empathize with one another, to recognize despite the shrugged shoulders and rolling eyes, that the part of us that can love is more important than the part of ourselves that needs to be loved. Leland de la Durantave describes this as Wallace’s ethic, describing it anecdotally as

not getting totally hosed to see that the cashier in the consumer hell-type situation has the soul-crushing job because it is in the cashier’s character to have a crappy job . . . That this person has a dreadfully boring job while you might have an interesting one is not because that is the right and true order of things in this, the best of all possible worlds, but because of contingent, crooked reasons that no logic – formal modal, or other – will straighten.”

(59)

Wallace, and of course Rushdie even if by extension alone, wants us to empathize with one another and to interpolate empathy back into our everyday lives in order to break our addictions to the televisual. Empathy is metonymical insofar as it requires a relation by association, a
relation of one addict to another, forming an identity no longer postmodern and, perhaps, beyond postcolonial.

A final, possibly metonymical connection between Rushdie and Wallace is the political implication of governing forces. Rushdie is well known for the political implications throughout his fiction, and perhaps reading Wallace for political implications would be beneficial. If considering “The Suffering Channel,” for instance, the source of power and hegemonic center appears to be the entertainment industry and the media. In a sense, it is the ability for such an industry to rely upon social excess and addiction that maintains power and control; entertainment (specifically televisual entertainment) having replaced religion exists as an opiate for the people. For viewers and producers of The Suffering Channel, it is the distant terror of suffering inhibiting human empathy. Amber Moltke and Skip Atwater are testaments to this empathetic inhibition; never in the name of god or nation, their motives are far more selfish and all the while ruled by the needs of entertainment and potentially subsequent fame. It is the entertainment that maintains control, and, in a sense, “The Suffering Channel” is a smaller commentary on the dangers of entertainment as we see in Infinite Jest. In a more traditionally political mode, Wallace deals explicitly with government in The Pale King as well.

How this might inform political implications throughout the rest of Wallace’s fiction as Rushdie’s fiction would certainly deepen our understanding of Wallace’s work, necessitating an analysis of his fiction that reveals the tentacles of systemic forces. “The Suffering Channel” does not involve much in terms of governmental systems, though there is a lingering notion of the September 11 attacks hovering over the narrative. The focus Wallace places on the happenings in Style magazine could work as a political, socio-cultural commentary on the capitalized, commoditized audience who may have fallen immediately back into the same way of life after or
as the events of 9/11 occur – the same way of life depicted in the narrative. The controlling forces in this case have become the commoditization of peoples’ suffering, of which there is suffering in abundance in a post-9/11 society.

While *Infinite Jest*, on the other hand, explicitly deals with governmental structures throughout, it is “the entertainment” (an actual televisual cartridge with the ability to kill its viewers) that becomes the target of major governmental factions. “The entertainment” runs in a loop, rendering the viewer comatose until s/he dies. In tandem with “The Suffering Channel,” perhaps Wallace is suggesting that the loop “the entertainment” plays is the same “loop” American society finds itself caught in despite even the high-impacting national trauma of 9/11. Furthermore, Wallace may also be suggesting that the political and governmental are under the control of a entertainment, systems of which are convinced of their own autonomy via their own circular logic and stubborn denial. In this sense, political governing bodies are as equally and malignantly addicted to entertainment and media.

Perhaps in this political approach to Wallace, a call for empathy in his fiction suggests the means by which his audience – an irony, televisual addicted generation – can escape the entertaining loop and the siren call of the media. By writing in a way that prompts empathy suggests that Wallace’s politics are deeply embedded in human connections, that human experience exists outside of the world of television and visual reference, and that empathy requires an associative relationship extending beyond the representational. In identifying with others this way, Wallace recognizes the importance of the association between others and the necessary metonymic connections requisite to induce empathy.

Of course Rushdie, though through a more postcolonial lens, also recognizes these things, and both see the need for empathetic connection as a means of forming contemporary identity.
As different and unrelated as Rushdie and Wallace may seem, they share this goal of inducing empathy in their readers using metonymy as the connecting device. Be it postcolonial or post-postmodern, a metonymical connection is definitively necessary to induce empathy, a task Rushdie and Wallace consistently accomplish throughout their fiction.
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