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CHAPTER 10

Story Cycles

Paul March-Russell

In 2001, James Nagel observed that “never has the genre of the short-story cycle been used with greater force or variety than in the American fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, when it became the genre of choice for emerging writers from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds.”¹ More recently, Jeff Birkenstein has also acknowledged the importance of ethnic diversity for an understanding of the resurgence of the short story cycle in the last quarter of the century – he quotes J. Gerald Kennedy on the need to represent “characters living on two sides of the hyphen” – but sees this as part of a changing representation of the idea of community over the last hundred years.² In building upon these observations, this chapter does not propose to revisit the definitional debates that surround the short story cycle or the other synonyms that have been suggested for the genre: short story sequence, composite novel, short story novel.³ Instead, it focuses on what the genre achieved in the 1990s via a series of recurring tropes, such as history, memory, community, race, and sexuality, at the same time as a post-WW2 consensus on the meaning of these concepts declined, in part, because of developments such as multiculturalism. As Birkenstein argues, in his comparative analysis of Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Kelly Cherry’s *The Society of Friends* (1999), the short story cycle lends writers both a tradition to work in and a flexibility to work with, where neither generic nor social convention are static but are contingent upon historical change. In that sense, the flourishing of the story-cycle during the 1990s is symptomatic of other attempts within the literature of the period to negotiate its immediate predecessors and to encourage what Jeffrey Eugenides called “new language . . . from human voices, not just new theories.”⁴

Nevertheless, despite the understandable celebrations of the genre’s cultural reach to be found amongst short story critics such as Birkenstein, Nagel and others, its re-emergence during the decade also reflected tensions within the literary marketplace. Whilst on the one hand, the eclipse of high

postmodernism and the absorption of its tropes into mainstream culture suggested the demise of experimentalism, on the other hand, the prospects for hypertext and a revolution in print and digital media suggested a large-scale renovation of the publishing industry and the novel form (see Chapter 5). The short story cycle, given its roots in a residual oral tradition, could be seen as one way of reenergizing and keeping alive the novel form in a decade of uncertainty about its future direction, let alone its survival into the new millennium. The marketing of themed collections of short stories as novels was a further means by which the novel could be legitimated despite doubts over its sustained existence. At the same time, whilst small independent bookstores were under attack from the aggressive practices of chains such as Borders, the bookshop could also be legitimated as a venue for cultural consumption through the heavy promotion of novels (even if, in practice, they were actually short story cycles). The maintenance of these outlets and the visibility of such promotions provided opportunities for writers, often graduates of creative writing programs trained in the construction of short stories, to publish cycles that were marketed as novels. Although the practice of publishing, selling, and reviewing themed collections as if they were novels has frequently been criticized as a categorical error,⁵ a more pragmatic response would be to say that it enables writers to be published and promoted whilst maintaining the industry's illusion that there is such a thing as a (quote, unquote) novel. Sustaining this illusion would reap benefits for the short story cycle in the twenty-first century, for example, in the popular and critical successes of such books as Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). Short story cycles of the 1990s therefore exemplify a publishing industry in a state of transition. To explore this transitional phase I examine the work of six authors in relation to three respective themes – trauma, history, and sexuality: Tim O'Brien and Robert Olen Butler; Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie; and A.M. Homes and David Foster Wallace.

Memories of Vietnam

The title story of *The Things They Carried* (1990), Tim O'Brien's fictionalised account of the platoon with whom he fought during the Vietnam War, first appeared in 1986, one year after his third novel, *The Nuclear Age*. As Mark Heberle notes, "the shorter stories took on a life of their own" so that O'Brien's fourth novel (*In the Lake of the Woods*) did not appear until 1994.⁶ O'Brien's compulsive need to keep working on both the content and structure of his collection at the expense of, what might be termed, the

proper business of novel writing seems to confirm Heberle's description of O'Brien as "a trauma artist": his writing intertwined with his uncontrolled and repeated obsession with the primal scene of horror.

Yet, insofar as O'Brien is a writer of trauma, he particularly contributes to the contemporaneous acceptance of trauma as a conceptual tool.⁷ For Roger Luckhurst, following the science historian Bruno Latour, such concepts are better described as "knots" that entangle often competing cultural discourses, in this instance, a postmodern ethic of the unrepresentable, a deconstructive concern with aporia, and a psychoanalytic emphasis upon repetition.⁸ In repeatedly returning to the same events from multiple perspectives, O'Brien not only mimics the melancholic behaviour of the traumatized subject but also, in terms of textual effect, produces further ways of viewing and articulating the same material. It is in that latter sense that O'Brien's use of trauma complements Latour's conceptual understanding of the knot since, in disentangling the narrative, the reader constructs further discourses, further ways of seeing and saying the same events. Trauma, then, in O'Brien's fiction is not simply a melancholic condition that silences speech, but rather a strategy that serves to articulate the impossibility of voicing the unrepresentable.

Central to this process is O'Brien's discussion in the story "Good Form" of the relative merits of "story-truth" and "happening-truth."⁹ The latter, as Stefania Ciocia relates, "makes a claim to literalness, factuality and objectivity" whilst the former tries "to salvage, and then communicate, the exact intensity of the original impact of the narrated events on those who experienced them."¹⁰ In this latter sense, then, O'Brien's writing not only veers to what Nathaniel Hawthorne termed "the truth of the human heart" but, in rooting itself within the aesthetic legacy of the American Renaissance, also resists what O'Brien has disparaged as the frivolous excesses of postmodernism.¹¹ Yet, in seeking to contextualize O'Brien's use of trauma within an overriding commitment to storytelling,¹² Ciocia omits that the ethical turn in O'Brien's fiction is itself a consequence of how trauma has been conceived as a procedural strategy in his fiction. Such a strategy is clear, for example, in the emphases upon witnessing and representation as embodied by the meta-commentary to "How to Tell a True War Story." The use of trauma as a storytelling principle not only resists narrative closure – as O'Brien's narrator informs the reader, "You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end"¹³ – but it also produces critical interpretations that, far from explicating O'Brien's motivations, can only result in a tentative reading of the text.

O'Brien's successful contribution to the revival of the short story cycle is, arguably, due to the capacity of his writing to produce multiple and possibly conflicting readings. By contrast, the sub-genre has traditionally been thought of as a self-sufficient structure, circling around a central theme, location, or protagonist before looping back upon itself. The attempts of more recent critics, such as Robert Luscher, to open-out this enclosed unity by describing the cycle as a linear sequence that (paradoxically) constructs "a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact" glosses over the deliberate non-linearity and multiple meanings of texts such as *The Things They Carried*.¹⁴ Instead, the concentric structure of the short story cycle lends itself to the kinds of knotted experience that O'Brien is attempting to articulate, during which the stories not only shift in points of view but also in time and space, and oscillate between history – publically received accounts of the war – and memory – the subjective perceptions of the protagonists, both then and now. The stories not only return to the same events, but also generate a feedback loop of extra data, which in turn creates additional layers of interference in terms of what can be communicated to the reader. "There is no clarity. Everything swirls," the character Mitchell Sanders observes.¹⁵ But this "great ghastly fog" of war not only expresses the perception of the fighting man but also the frustrated desire of the reader, specifically a U.S. reader of the early 1990s, to render the meaning of the war transparent. It is this traumatic relationship between the reader and the text, this entanglement, which contributed to its success.

By contrast, in Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992), the trauma is off-stage but nevertheless pervades the memories and experiences of the immigrant Vietnamese community in Louisiana. In many respects, the collection is a more traditional short story cycle than *The Things They Carried*, since it is bound by theme and location, and this, allied to its multicultural characters, may have contributed to its Pulitzer Prize award in 1993. Whereas O'Brien foregrounds the tensions between, and within, history and memory, Butler presents his characters in the muted realism typified by the immediate legacy of Raymond Carver. This formal and stylistic tendency in Butler's collection lends both dignity and respect to his treatment of the Vietnamese but it also marks the limits of what Butler, as a white North American, can know about the migrant experience. In much the same way as O'Brien has been accused of machismo and misogyny, Butler has been criticised for "cultural ventriloquism."¹⁶ Yet, just as O'Brien's fiction can be read as a perilous negotiation

of these tendencies, so Butler grounds his characters within the setting of Louisiana and the tensions faced by first-generation settlers; a move that, like O'Brien's affinity for Hawthorne, places his fiction within the patterns of migration and assimilation that have characterised American history.

The collection can also be positioned in terms of an ethical turn and, more broadly speaking, the hauntological discourse that pervaded the Humanities during the 1990s, a mix of Derridean deconstruction, post-Freudian psychoanalysis, and the melancholic legacy of neo-Marxists such as Walter Benjamin, in which official versions of history remain haunted by the unsublimated memories of spectral presences. Following Benjamin, the memories of Butler's dislocated Vietnamese remain at the level of raw experience (*Erfahrung*), unprocessed into a sense-making narrative (*Erlebnis*).¹⁷ This disjuncture, which some critics have read as indicative of Butler's post-modernism, can instead be seen as symptomatic of the negotiations around the subject of realism that characterised American fiction of the 1980s and 1990s in the wake of the postmodern literature of exhaustion.¹⁸ What gives it nuance is Butler's attempt to migrate between an American-styled literature of lowered expectations, and memories, histories, and folklore that are Oriental in origin. Examples include the character of Thập, the Vietnamese villager turned spy who commits suicide in the opening story, and whose tragedy is recalled by a former army translator; the historical figure of Ho Chi Minh reimagined by a dying man on his deathbed in the title story; and the succubus who devours a Vietnamese major in "A Ghost Story." The hallucinatory or fantastical elements in the latter stories are given credence by Butler's seemingly realist style and his use of classic storytelling devices, such as the "shabby Oriental man, a little frayed at the collar and cuffs" who tells his fellow bus passenger the story of the succubus.¹⁹ This fantasy aspect is also reinforced by the folkloric structures and supernatural motifs that surface in other stories in the collection (for example "Fairy Tale," "Mid-Autumn," and "In the Clearing") and which, as with late Carver stories such as "Blackbird Pie" (1988), unsettle their otherwise realistic frameworks. Unlike the work of his near contemporaries, however, the discordant tonal registers of Butler's fiction suggest the irresolution of a Vietnamese cultural identity into its new American setting. As Ted, or rather Thiệu, comments in the story "Crickets," he is drawn to "the flat bayou land of Louisiana" because it reminds him of the Mekong Delta.²⁰ The projection of the Vietnamese landscape onto that of Louisiana not only indicates Ted/Thiệu's cultural displacement, but also his melancholic and traumatic fixations on the past, a cyclical effect complemented by the narrative resources of the short story cycle.

Native American Histories

This sense of an unresolved or hybrid identity is given memorable expression in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (first published in 1984). Set in and around a fictional reservation in North Dakota, the book describes the interlaced histories of Ojibwa, mixed-blood, and European-American families over a fifty-year period. Although subtitled and marketed as a novel, seven of the original fourteen chapters were published as short stories and, as Hertha Sweet Wong observes, were scarcely revised for the book.²¹ The remaining chapters, edited as customary with Erdrich's husband Michael Dorris, followed the same episodic structure.

In 1993, Erdrich revisited the text with the apparent intention of fitting it better into the quartet of novels that also included *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). As Sarah Bennett notes, Erdrich's revisions ranged from the relatively minor to resolving loose ends within the original text, to introducing characters and altering the development of those already present, to clarifying and correcting details so that they (mostly) accord with the other works in the saga.²² The question, then, is the extent to which these changes not only brought *Love Medicine* into line with the overarching structure of her novel sequence, but also rendered it less a short story cycle and more a fully integrated novel with a continuous narrative? At the same time, however, Erdrich complicated this apparent opposition between novel and short story cycle by expanding one of the chapters, "The Beads," and by interspersing four new chapters through the course of the narrative. Whilst these additions created bridges between *Love Medicine* and *Tracks*, as well as setting up *The Bingo Palace* as the next part in the sequence, they also reemphasized the original text's episodic form. Although "The Island," for example, complements earlier chapters by offering Lulu's perspective as the third party in a love triangle that also involves Nector and Marie, the shift in point of view strengthens the original text's fragmented and multi-perspectival structure.

Wong, finding neither Luscher's short story sequence nor the composite novel of influential Native American texts such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* (1981) adequate to describing *Love Medicine's* form, positions the text in terms of an oral tradition that emphasizes narrative expansion and recursion, including the embedding of stories within stories.²³ Such a move, although acknowledging the reservation's traumatising effects upon the indigenous population, nevertheless distances the book from Butler's and O'Brien's uses of trauma by positing these narrative strategies as the residual folk culture's archetypes. Yet, instead of regarding the tensions and

distortions upon the narrative as symptomatic of a history that, *pace* Fredric Jameson, hurts,²⁴ it is possible to read them as an inoculation against such a history, in particular by suggesting that – despite it all – community, rather than individual alienation, is what endures.

We might then reverse how critics viewed Erdrich's deletions, additions, and expansions both at the time of the reedited volume and in subsequent years. Instead of seeing these changes as attempts to calibrate *Love Medicine's* form and content within the other texts' overarching framework, we could value them for the way in which they complicate that structure. Instead of dismissing Erdrich's description of Eli, for example, as Rushes Bear's "youngest son" as an error introduced by reediting,²⁵ we could respond to how it productively affects the rest of the series. There are now two versions of the same genealogy, one in which Eli is the youngest, the other where his brother, Nector, is younger. Although this paradox may offend Western-centric views of narrative time, in which memory and genealogy operate according to a rectilinear sense of historical progression, it nonetheless accords with the cyclical and simultaneous experience of time to be found within Native American cosmologies. This affinity not only breaks open the historical continuum in ways that appear similar to O'Brien's traumatized narratives, but it is also grounded within a folklore that offsets the modishness of postmodern thought. Erdrich, then, expands upon the narrative structure of the family saga by subjecting it to her own cultural heritage's belief systems.

Sherman Alexie approaches the same dichotomy of modish, postmodern re-readings of historical narrative versus traditional indigenous beliefs in cyclical experience, but in an even more playful way. Published in the same year as Erdrich's revised *Love Medicine*, Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* prefigures his novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995) by introducing the Spokane Indian Reservation and the characters Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor Joseph, and Junior Polatkin. Despite these links, however, there is no clear sense that Alexie saw the story cycle as a try-out for the novel; as he more pragmatically put it in interview, "I had a two-book deal with Atlantic Monthly Press."²⁶ (The novel eventually appeared with Warner Books.) Instead, the story cycle should be read in terms of its play with mythic and historical representations of the Native American peoples.

As Birkenstein comments, the collection is underwritten by the characters' conflicting "desire to remain on the reservation and to leave it," a paradox that results in "the stasis of indecision."²⁷ This uncertainty associates the protagonists with the characters of other, pioneering short story cycles

such as Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914). Unlike his modernist predecessors, however, the indecisiveness of Alexie's characters is racially circumscribed, so that their doubts as to where they should belong is symptomatic of a struggle between what the reservation represents – the surviving remnants of a Native American culture brutally suppressed by European settlers – and what departure embodies – a vicarious hope of freedom but, more likely, economic and social marginalisation within a dominant white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture.

Two quotations capture the limited parameters within which Alexie's characters operate. First, there is the epigram interpolated into the fragmentary story: "Imagining the Reservation": "Survival = Anger x Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation."²⁸ Second, there is the question posed in the same story by Victor: "How can we imagine a new language when the language of the enemy keeps our dismembered tongues tied to his belt?"²⁹ If language and communication have been so viciously silenced, then what hope is there for imagination to be articulated? This dilemma underwrites the Kafkaesque tale, "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire," in which Thomas, the storyteller, after nearly twenty years of silence, is arrested for making "small noises," "syllables that contained more emotion and meaning than entire sentences constructed by the BIA."³⁰ Responding to this story, Elizabeth Archuleta argues that Thomas' storytelling in court "introduces a horizontal system of justice" that confounds both the hierarchies of the court system and the restrictions upon what can be counted as evidence.³¹ Despite the absurd denouement, in which Thomas is sentenced to two concurrent life-terms for retelling the story of a nineteenth-century Native American who killed a pair of soldiers, he not only rediscovers the power of storytelling but, as the courtroom erupts "into motion and emotion,"³² also reconnects with his community. Indeed, when Thomas is persuaded by the other convicts in the prison van to tell a story, Alexie's tale hints at the opposition between storytelling and political authority that critics such as Michael Hanne regard as vital to the workings of fiction.³³ As if to confirm this point, Thomas's grandson, who finds that "the younger people on the reservation had no time for stories," becomes a hotel worker before meeting a (presumably) grisly end, drunk and alone.³⁴

The construction of Alexie's text, though, works against such a downbeat conclusion. As the final report in "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" indicates, where Thomas is "transported away from this story and into the next,"³⁵ his confinement could be read as nothing but a metafictional exercise. Yet, as with the postmodern elements that occur in Erdrich's and O'Brien's narrative strategies, these techniques are motivated by a moral

anger at a history that is both traumatic and unrepresentable. Alexie's use of such devices draws not only upon the same elements of folklore as utilized by Erdrich but also upon the greater self-reflexivity to be found in the short story cycle as opposed to the realist novel. More than this however, Alexie not only questions the authority and demarcations of the judicial system, distinctions between what is just and unjust, legal and illegal, admissible and inadmissible, he also contests how literary fiction is organized and, in particular, the author's arbitrary powers of selection such as moving one character from one story to the next. The author is no more objective than Thomas's judge: the decentring of his/her position paves the way for the blending of myth, history, folklore, and popular – principally televisual – culture to be seen in Alexie's text.

Medicated Selves

A.M. Homes's story cycle, *The Safety of Objects* (1990), is one of the examples used by David Foster Wallace in his essay-cum-manifesto, "E Unibus Pluram" (1993), to describe what he terms "Image-Fiction," in which "the transient received myths of popular culture" are utilised "as a *world* in which to imagine fictions about 'real,' albeit pop-mediated, characters."³⁶ As part of his wider thesis, this loose subgenre of texts not only mines televisual culture as a source of inspiration but also that the irony, which Wallace sees as integral to TV's production and consumption, negates fiction's efforts to transfigure that material into something which might revolutionize either medium (see Chapter 13).

Whether this description is true of Homes's collection is another matter. *The Safety of Objects* can instead be viewed as part of the hyperrealism that characterised the work of Carver and his contemporaries, such as Richard Ford and Tobias Wolff, a kind of modest postmodernism that nevertheless realistically explored its characters through their relationship to such simulacra as television, shopping malls, and commercial brands, as well as suburban towns such as Homes's fictional setting in Westchester County, New York. In this respect, Homes's work is representative of how this strategy of accommodating postmodern elements within an otherwise realistic framework became a familiar trope in other North American fiction of the period (for example, in the stories of Douglas Coupland, Rick Moody, or Lorrie Moore). At the same time, the more shocking aspects of Homes's cycle – the preoccupations with sex, death, drugs, and madness – echo the darker tendencies of the so-called dirty realism of the 1980s; for example, in T. Coraghessan Boyle's "Greasy Lake" (1982). In that sense, then,

Homes's collection represents a working through of several of the *leitmotifs* that had characterized American short fiction of the 1980s in addition to the influence of the televisual culture that Wallace pinpoints. As with Carver's focus upon the lives of blue-collar workers, however, it is also possible to see Homes's work fitting into a tradition that harks again to Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*: the concentration upon psychologically or emotionally divided individuals alienated from one another within an otherwise claustrophobic small-town environment. Within that context, Homes's cycle fits with a number of dissident fictions both in print and on television – David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks* aired for the first time in the same year – that invert the sentimental stereotype of small-town America.

Nonetheless, what gives the cycle its contemporaneity, and what extends the focus of Homes's debut novel *Jack* (1989), is its preoccupation with childhood and adolescence. In this respect, the collection shares affinities with such works as Denis Johnson's short story cycle *Jesus' Son* (1992) and Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), in that the texts can be seen as responding to Neil Postman's influential jeremiad *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982). For Postman, childhood is a relatively recent social development formed symptomatically from the divisive effect of print culture upon the "adult" and the "child." Contemporary media though, and here Postman is thinking specifically of television, erases this distinction and inducts children prematurely into adult concerns: "for they not only promote the unseating of childhood through their form and context but reflect its decline in their content."³⁷ So, in stories such as "Chunky in Heat," "A Real Doll," and "Yours Truly," Homes's adolescents explore their sexual desires often through media-saturated fantasies and commercial products: most notably, in "A Real Doll" where the narrator forms a perverse sexual relationship with his sister's Barbie. At the same time, the supposedly grown-up protagonists of stories such as "Adults Alone" and "Jim Train" regress into juvenile behaviour – arguing, uncleanliness, petty drug-taking, or silly pranks (urinating on the office plants).

More insightfully, however, Homes suggests that this conduct is symptomatic of how childhood – and, indeed, adulthood – have been socially constructed and perceived. In "Looking for Johnny," for example, Erol's kidnapper eventually lets him go because "[y]ou're not the kid I thought you'd be."³⁸ The kidnapper takes no responsibility for Erol's inability to measure up to the ideal of a boy who excels at sports, fishing, and craftwork, and instead the blames Erol himself: "I ran until I didn't know the names of the people in the houses around me. I ran through backyards until I stopped hearing Rayenne's voice calling Error."³⁹ Similarly, in "A Real

Doll,” the narrator’s desire for Barbie is in part motivated by his incomprehension at how his sister treats her:

“Why do you let her do this to you?”

“Jennifer owns me,” Barbie moaned.

Jennifer owns me, she said, so easily and with pleasure. I was totally jealous.⁴⁰

In seeing his sister only as a rival for Barbie’s affections, the narrator fails to understand both the complex love-hate relationship between little girls and their dolls, and his own heteronormative thinking about gender and sexuality: after masturbating into Ken’s body, he asks himself whether a “decision about my future life as queerbait had to be made?”⁴¹ Homes’s young protagonists are subject as much to the already internalized cultural meanings of childhood as they are to their remediation via the influence of televisual culture.

Arguably, the same set of anxieties surrounding childhood’s construction, perception, and understanding underwrites Wallace’s exploration of (primarily) male sexuality in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). “Forever Overhead,” the first of the longer stories in the collection placed after two preliminary sketches and significantly before the first set of “Brief Interviews,” focuses on a thirteen-year-old boy’s birthday as he prepares to dive into the local public swimming pool. Uncharacteristically for Wallace’s fiction, the allegorical meaning of the story is as transparent as the water below: the dive is an initiation, a “chance for people to recognize that important things are happening to you.”⁴² As the protagonist dwells upon his sexual development, and observes his parents and the pride they feel for him, the “girl-women . . . curved like instruments or fruit,” and the pool as “a system of movement,”⁴³ he is temporarily lost in self-consciousness like many of Wallace’s other characters. In a more experimental move, the story narrates the individual’s self-division in the second-person: the protagonist is both the subject and object of the narration. This liminal space is finally breached once he becomes aware of time’s inexorable movement. “Now that there is time you don’t have time,” and the boy takes the (both literal and metaphorical) plunge: “Step into the skin and disappear.”⁴⁴ The dive may represent the passage from innocence into experience, from self-consciousness into bodily sensation, but in the context of Wallace’s usage of the story cycle, it also represents a descent into the confusion of sexual behaviour that pervades the collection: the next voice that the reader hears is from a man who spontaneously shouts, “Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!” at the moment of ejaculation.⁴⁵

Four sets of “Brief Interviews” punctuate the collection and act as a framing device for the book’s investigation into misogyny and male sexuality. As Wallace notes, these sections describe “events that are being related to an interlocutor, and in fact a hostile one, so that there is a blur between how much of the stuff is involuntary and how much is the rhetoric of the presentation.”⁴⁶ In other words, the interviews – like other stories in the collection – feature a tension between self-conscious performance and unconscious slips where something authentic in the character’s discourse may be glimpsed. One such slip that recurs during the collection is that of a woman’s comparison to a toilet as an object into which the man can evacuate himself, a degrading misogynistic image in which the woman is portrayed as a void to be filled by the man’s sexual excess. Such imagery, suggesting in psychoanalytic terms a primal wound, gap, or tear that underscores the illusory wholeness of male sexuality, is justified by men such as interviewee #48 who are equally well-versed in psychoanalytic and post-structural theory: “whether I might . . . tie them up, is describable, at least in part, in the phrase of Marchesani and Van Slyke’s theory of masochistic symbolism, as *proposing a contractual scenario*.”⁴⁷ In this instance, however, an ironic distance is discernible between Wallace’s reading in such theories (of which Marchesani and Van Slyke are a fictional parody) and their manipulation by his male characters for the sake of their own self-justification.

Wallace is less successful, however, in portraying female sexuality except as contingent upon the mythical primacy of the phallus (the illusionary status of which is integral to the suggestively titled story “Signifying Nothing”). In “Adult World (I),” for example, the young wife worries that in her own sexual satisfaction “she had selfishly forgotten about his thingie and might have been too hard on it.”⁴⁸ Her increasingly obsessive attempts to satisfy her husband are written off in “Adult World (II)” as a series of clichés – akin to an early Philip Roth short story – by Wallace’s presentation of the sequel as a series of working notes to the author. Although Wallace is merciless in his analysis of male sexual psychology, his investigation into female desire marks (at least here) the limit of his imagination. Instead, as in the narcissism and quick-fix solutions of “The Depressed Person,” whose self-absorption bores her own therapist into committing suicide, Wallace’s real target is the dual melancholic and self-congratulatory moves of post-modern metafiction that he lampoons in “Octet.” Such tactics may mean that even genuine honesty may be dismissed as someone who “goes around at the party and goes up to strangers and *asks* them whether they like him or not.”⁴⁹ The stranglehold of metafiction is therefore not unlike the social

protocol of the opening sketch “anxious . . . to preserve good relations at all times.”⁵⁰

While Nagel and Birkenstein were right to identify the short story cycle as a forum for exploring multicultural identities and experience, the work of these six authors also reveals that the subgenre did vital work in this period by attempting to move literary fiction beyond the paradigms of post-modernism and to engage with concepts such as memory, history, culture, and identity that the latter had appeared to erase. In that respect, it also helped to revitalize the resources of the novel within the changing market conditions of the 1990s.

NOTES

- 1 James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 17.
- 2 Jeff Birkenstein, “‘Should I Stay or Should I Go?’: American Restlessness and the Short-Story Cycle”, in Alfred Bendixen and James Nagel, eds. *A Companion to the American Short Story* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 483.
- 3 Some of the key texts within this critical debate include Forrest L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971); Susan Garl and Mann, *The Short Story Cycle* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1989); J. Gerald Kennedy, ed. *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (New York: Twayne, 1995); and George R. Clay, ‘Structuring the Short-Story Novel’, *Writer’s Chronicle* 31.3 (1998): 23–31. See also Robert M. Luscher’s overview, ‘The American Short-Story Cycle: Out from the Novel’s Shadow’, in Alfred Bendixen, ed. *A Companion to the American Novel* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 359–372.
- 4 Jeffrey Eugenides, interview with Jonathan Safran Foer (2002), in Betsy Sussler, ed. *BOMB: The Author Interviews* (New York: Soho Press, 2014), 141.
- 5 See, for example, Nagel on the original publication of *Love Medicine*, 18–20.
- 6 Mark A. Heberle, *A Trauma Artist: Tim O’Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001), 177.
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