**David Foster Wallace and Music: The Grunge Writer and the Hitherto Criminally Overlooked Importance of *Signifying Rappers***

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From the title of this paper, you’ll no doubt gather that I’m starting to think about Wallace’s writing and music, and what the juxtaposition of these two art forms might mean. This is – or will be, I probably should say, to completely honest – a paper that explores this potential. I also hope it acts as a call for further scholarship in this area as a way of diversifying and invigorating Wallace studies.

I get the sense from recent Wallace scholarship that we are at something of a turning point in our discipline. Perhaps we need to be. Perhaps we even need quite desperately to be. Perhaps the timing of this conference, then, couldn’t be better.

On the back cover of Boswell’s newest collection of essays it’s suggested by Brian McHale that our thinking about Wallace is ‘congealing prematurely’ around well-established paradigms on his work. I’m not sure about anyone else in the audience today, but to me, I always think of wounds when I hear the word ‘congealing’, which I suppose was the writer’s point.

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The congealing of blood, of course, is an important part of the healing process, but the idea of *thinking* being congealed sounds like a decidedly unhealthy thing, academically speaking.

So, this is my attempt to get, sorry, the blood flowing again? Is that stretching the metaphor too far?

Firstly, I propose that the nexus between Wallace and music has been under-examined in academic circles. My aim is to show how exploring Wallace through the theme of music can yield new insights about his work. Then I will further trace back Wallace’s lineage beyond grunge to punk, Situationism, dada. Finally, I’ll argue that *Signifying Rappers* deserves special attention in this exploration due to the fact it is the only extant text where Wallace speaks at length about the art form, as well as a more important precursor to his subsequent work than has been previously acknowledged.

Anyway, let’s get started…

In Wallace’s short story slash novella ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’, the character Mark Nechtr is described as ‘a boy hotly cocky enough to think he might someday inherit Ambrose’s bald crown and ballpoint sceptre, to wish to try and sing to the *next* generation of the very same sad kids’ (348).

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Some 25 pages later, ‘Westward…’ then ends with these words: ‘Listen to the silence behind the engine’s noise. Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it? It’s a love song. For whom? You are loved’ (373).

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Both of these utterances have garnered considerable critical attention over the last few years.

Nechtr and his wish to try and sing to the next generation has been widely interpreted as an autobiographical statement on the part of Wallace, standing in for his own desires for his overall writing project and even, more widely, his view of the aims of literature itself.

Nowhere, though, in all this excellent criticism has the subject of music been broached in anything more than the most perfunctory of ways, if at all, really. Surprising, since both excerpts reference song. Even more surprising, still perhaps, since we all know that Wallace was the co-author of a book on rap.

I’d go so far as to say that there’s a very real sense in which the statement about wishing to sing to the next generation has informed an enormous amount of the texts that we consider make up the body of Wallace scholarship, yet the nexus between Wallace and music remains what I would consider significantly under-examined.

There are other examples, too, of Wallace referencing music in order to communicate with his readers in that unique way of his that’s the reason so many of us are here today: just to give you one or two: Wallace has said that ‘god has certain languages, one of them is mathematics and one of them is music’ (Crain, in Burn, 124).[[1]](#footnote-1)

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Then there’s this: ‘pure undampered sound longing’ from *Infinite Jest* (695).

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This is Wallace describing an element on James Incandenza’s fictional film *The American Century as Seen Through a Brick*. I think it’s no accident that this passage comes immediately before a much longer, more famous one where he describes the character Kate Gompert’s depression. Is it possible that by the simple juxtaposition of these two elements of the story, Wallace is positing depression in some sense as a lack of music? I don’t think that’s too long a bow to draw. Wallace’s description of Gompert’s (his own?) disease here are arguably the finest that have ever been written, and depression is also often the lens through which a large part of Wallace studies is focussed. As such, to examine Wallace’s work without at least paying some attention to the role music plays in it seems to me counterintuitive at best.

There are many other examples, too numerous to be broached at any great length here. I’ll finish this little introductory section of my talk, though, by saying that Lipsky’s book-length interview, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, is positively peppered with references to music, not the least of which is a two and a half page conversation - without a doubt my favourite part of the book – where Wallace fantasises about going out on a date with Alanis Morrissete.

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**The Grunge Writer**

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Inherent in the title of Clinton Heylin’s mammoth punk history, *Babylon’s Burning: from Punk to Grunge*, is the implication that the two musical movements share a temporal and philosophical lineage.

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Wallace, of course, is often referred to as a grunge writer, *Infinite Jest*, famously, as ‘The grunge American novel’,[[2]](#footnote-2) so for my purposes here, grunge’s status as punk’s little sibling and some kind of historical endpoint are important for my examination of Wallace and music.

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So, I’m calling Wallace, as others have, ‘the grunge writer’. This is, of course, a highly problematic assertion. D.T. Max, in the biography *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, for example, examines both the similarities and the differences between Wallace and Nirvana (as just one example) at some length.

He postulates that ‘the grunge references probably irritated Wallace’ (321, FN23), and (highly problematically), that grunge’s ‘undemanding hopelessness flew in the face of his recovery theology’ (223). But Max does acknowledges that the comparison between Wallace and grunge had ‘considerable truth to it’ (221), and that:

[B]oth proffered an awkward sincerity. They shared an allergy to facades, to disco-type slickness. *Infinite Jest*’s jagged multiple-conjunction opening sentences held the same promise of authenticity as the primitive musical arrangement and bad amping of Seattle garage bands. (221).

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So, if Wallace was grunge, it then obviously follows that he was punk as well, given their relatedness, does it not? (Bear with me here). Wallace goes to some trouble in *Signifying Rappers* pointing out his disdain for punk, but I don’t think that really matters.

Music journalist and cultural critic Griel Marcus, in *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, spends an entire book connecting the dots between European avant-garde movements like dada and surrealism to Situationism and then to punk.

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One of the book’s most interesting features, for me, is that Marcus is able to paint a picture of unknown connectedness between different artists working in disparate fields, sometimes decades apart. For instance, here we have a quote where Marcus connects The Sex Pistols with the Situationists:

In ‘Anarchy in the U.K.,’ a twenty-year-old called Johnny Rotten had rephrased a social critique generated by people who, as far as he knew, had never been born. Who knew what else was part of the tale? (23).

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And this sense of connectedness is important to my argument here that examining Wallace and music is a valid course of academic endeavour, because connectedness is the first condition of community, and community excited Wallace, be it gathering to watch television in ‘The View from Mrs Thompson’s’ or AA meetings in *Infinite Jest*, or conversations in lifts in *The Pale King*.

And then there’s this, again from Marcus, as another example of the connections between punk and Situationism, which I’ll then attempt to link further to Wallace.

A recurrent Situationist theme: the idea of ‘the vacation’ as a sort of loop of alienation and domination, a symbol of the false promises of modern life, a notion that as CLUB MED – A CHEAP HOLIDAY IN OTHER PEOPLE’S MISERY would become graffiti in Paris in May 1968, and then, it seemed, turned into ‘Holidays in the Sun’ (21).

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‘Holidays in the Sun’, for those who don’t know, is a song by The Sex Pistols, the first line of which is ‘cheap holidays in other people’s misery’, a theme Wallace would explore at great length in ‘A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again’?

Consequently, if we can draw a kind of psychogeographical map from early avant-garde movements like dada and surrealism, to Situationism to punk, then it’s not a huge stretch to continue drawing that map to include grunge and, yes, Wallace.

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There’s also other scholarship beginning to emerge on the subject of Wallace’s connections to Situationism (and, I would argue, then to punk slash grunge). I’ll put my fellow panel-member Mr Thornton at the top of the list, of course, but in *A* *Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, Burn also talks of Infinite Jest’s ‘psychic geography’ (82), which sounds an awful lot like psychogeography to me, a term the Situationists were very fond of. In the same text, Quinn directly references the Situationists when discussing Wallace’s Mid West (95) and Evans, again in the same book, and again directly, references arguably the most famous of all Situationist texts, Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*.

With all this, it’s becoming clear to me that the links between Wallace and Situationism are beginning to make themselves felt more and more strongly in our thinking about his work, and I’m certain I’m not alone in regarding this as an extraordinarily exciting development, and one that should contribute quite meaningfully to whatever it is that the opposite of congealment might be.

In closing this section, I’d just like to note that Situationism is, of course, a kind of anti-philosophy. In an essay I wrote on them recently, I referred to the Situationists as ‘ratbag intellectuals’.

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Despite the fact that Wallace was a serious philosopher, he was also an inveterate prankster, a fellow indeed of infinite jest, and I think he would have been thrilled to be keeping this kind of scurrilous company.

Finally, I’ve just effectively called Wallace both a philosopher and an anti-philosopher. It’s always good to end a section with a question, I feel, so I’ll ask the audience to ponder this: is there a sense in which music, by its very nature, fits neatly into an in-between ness or in a seemingly contradictory space like the one that might be generated by the tension between ‘serious’ and ‘ratbag’ philosophy? It’s always been my experience that the most exciting explorations take place in the interstices between established paradigms. Music is, of course, the most abstract of art forms, not to mention the one that Nietzsche tells us that all other art aspires to the condition of. Therefore, might music be our entranceway into this in-betweenness? These interstices where Wallace scholarship can find something like the new voices we’re being told it so desperately needs?

**The Hitherto Criminally Overlooked Importance of Signifying Rappers**

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Signifying Rappers! Is there any chance I can get a show of hands to see how many people have read it?

It’s a very strange little book. Wallace co-authored it with Mark Costello in 1989, and while the title would suggest something about its content, you might actually be quite surprised. In my opinion, it’s not really about rap, at least not that much. It’s got more to do with why these two geeky white boys became so interested in rap, how they saw rap as a reaction to the politics of the time (Reaganomics), and, like a lot of Wallace, it’s all about the style.

As far as I’m aware, there’s only ever been one academic paper on *Signifying Rappers.* This paper, by Tara Morrissey and Lucas Thompson, is called ‘”The Rare White at the Window”: A Reappraisal of Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace’s *Signifying Rappers*’, and it was published in the *Journal of American Studies* in January this year.

Quite spectacularly, I think, Morrissey and Thompson claim that Signifying Rappers has been ‘ghettoized’ (2) within Wallace studies, and I’d like to begin by talking a little about this.

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I’m making these claims today about Wallace scholarship benefiting from looking more closely at music in his work for several reasons, but the main one is undoubtedly because I can see a very strong and deliberate use of that art form in the work itself. Nowhere more so, naturally, than in *Signifying Rappers*. As such, it’s my contention that the sidelining of this text – the ‘ghettoization’ that Morrissey and Lucas talk about – is decidedly counterproductive. I say that *Signifying Rappers* should be entered into the same canon as the rest of Wallace’s work. Should it be considered on the same footing? That’s a whole other debate, but it should at least be a part of the conversation.

In his essay ‘Trickle-Down Citizenship: Taxes and Civic Responsibility in *The Pale King*’, collected in his recently published *David Foster Wallace and The Long Thing: New Essays on the Novels*, Professor Marshall Boswell claims that “Wallace’s shift to more politically engaged work can be traced back directly to his 2003 *Rolling Stone* article on the John McCain campaign” (211).

I’m a bogan from the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, so disagreeing with our keynote speaker, a professor from Rhodes and probably the world’s leading Wallace scholar is not something I do lightly.

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As such, can I suggest with the utmost respect that Professor Boswell has perhaps overlooked the significance of the deep political engagement Wallace showed in *Signifying Rappers*? Might I also suggest that this says something quite profound about the extent to which this text has, in fact, been ‘ghettoized’.

Boswell ends his terrific essay (is it obvious how nervous I am about disagreeing with him?) by saying that “his [Wallace’s] hopes for the book [*The Pale King*] were not just aesthetic but, in a very real sense of the term, political” (224). At the risk of sounding like a broken record (maybe a broken rap record), I think that the same thing, ultimately, can be said for *Signifying Rappers*.

Morrissey and Thompson agree too, I think, when they claim:

That *Signifying Rappers* has not made more of an impact on studies of hip-hop and race is regrettable: the study articulates, at times problematically but always in a spirit of cross-cultural earnestness, a fascinating confrontation of race and critical engagement that both pre-dates critical whiteness theory and sheds light on an area of Wallace’s intellectual curiosity that is seldom explored” (12).

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I think you’ll agree that this is an inherently political act on Wallace’s part, and a signifier – no pun intended – of an as yet unexamined political engagement.

But the main thrust of Morrissey and Thompson’s argument, and one I think I can build on here today, is that *Signifying Rappers* is not merely juvenilia, not – despite the fact Wallace seemed reluctant to discuss it – an embarrassment in any way. Rather, this text represents an extraordinarily valuable insight into a young writer just beginning to imagine the writing of what would become his great masterpiece.

I’ll go back to Morrisey and Thompson again one last time. I know you must be getting sick of hearing their names, but it’s tough when there’s so little other material to work with.

They say that: “A close interrogation of *Signifying Rappers* enriches our understanding of Wallace’s work, revealing an oblique vision of Wallace striving to articulate a personal artistic agenda in response to the postmodern literary tradition “ (1).

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But how exactly? Let’s look at this:

We first really begin to see in *Signifying Rappers* some of the stylistic chutzpah that we came to know and love so well:

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These devices were present in Wallace’s two previous books, but they would go on to a much fuller fruition in *Infinite Jest*, so their place in *Signifying Rappers* might well be seen as an important bridge. I don’t think it’s unfair to say that these technical quirks played a significant role in making Wallace the linguistically unique writer that he soon fully became.

Given that *Signifying Rappers* sits chronologically between *Girl With Curious Hair* and *Infinite Jest*, and given that Boswell has called ‘Westward’, contained, of course, within *Girl*, ‘one of the most important texts in Wallace’s oeuvre’ and a ‘preface to a masterpiece [*Infinite Jest*] he had not even written yet’ (102).[[3]](#footnote-3) is it possible to begin thinking about *Rappers* as some kind of postscript to that preface? I think it is.

And an analysis of *Signifying Rappers* such as this would provide a context to begin the crucial work of re-evaluating the prevailing interpretation of Wallace’s work through the lens of music.

1. Interestingly, Wallace wrote non-fiction books about both subjects: mathematics in *Everything and More* and, of course, music in *Signifying Rappers*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bruni, Frank, ‘The Grunge American Novel’, *The New York Times*, March 24, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Only in Wallace studies could a 150-page text be considered a preface. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)