THE SOCIAL LIVES OF BOOKS:
LITERARY NETWORKS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

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Abstract

Long-established models of literary production are changing dramatically as the digital era continues to blur, and at times erase, the divisions between authors, critics and readers. Millions of cultural consumers are now empowered to participate in previously closed literary conversations and to express forms of mass distinction through their purchases and reviews of books. My project argues that these traces of popular reading choices constitute a fresh perspective on elusive audience reactions to literature, one that reveals distinct networks of conversation that are transforming the relationships between writers and their readers, between the art of fiction and the market for books. Employing network analysis methodologies and ‘distant reading’ of book reviews, recommendations and other digital traces of cultural distinction, I develop a new model for literary culture in America today. Through readings of the fiction and reception of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, David Foster Wallace and Junot Díaz, this model outlines the fundamental requirements for contemporary literary fame.

My introduction lays the groundwork for the methodological tools I have developed to pursue this project and situates them in the critical traditions of literary reception, cultural capital and contemporary media theory. With these tools in hand, I describe the digital ecologies that have emerged around literature online and their value for studying the choices and connections that are made by professional critics and scholars as well as a much larger sample of contemporary readers. The project draws on two primary datasets: first, a corpus of professional and consumer book
reviews collected from nationally prestigious reviewing newspapers and magazines along with consumer reviews from Amazon (the latter dating back to 1996); second, networks of recommendations based on consumer purchases and book ownership drawn from the websites Amazon and LibraryThing. Using Named Entity Recognition and collocation-based networks allows me to compare the use of proper nouns like titles and author names in professional and commercial literary networks. These noun networks reveal not only the distinctions between everyday readers and more traditional arbiters of literary taste but the ways in which popular authors are increasingly carrying on multiple independent and complex literary conversations.

My first case study, in Chapter 1, explores the nature of contemporary literary fame through Thomas Pynchon, whose carefully guarded anonymity does not prevent him from living in Manhattan and dining with literary cognoscenti. This very postmodern prominence makes him an ideal candidate, an author who has gone to great lengths to communicate with readers almost entirely through fiction. Pynchon’s literary networks link together a dizzying array of cultural zones, from continental philosophy to jazz, from Joseph Schumpeter to *The Simpsons*. I argue that Pynchon’s ironic distance from capitalism is reflected in the networks his readers construct around his difficult, weighty tomes. This anti-consumer consumption draws together the aspirations and anxieties of both the 1960s counterculture and the techno-scientific corporate behemoth, leading readers into their own acts of critical production, ranging from Pynchon wikis and mailing lists to an encrypted broadcast of *The Crying of Lot 49* in semaphore from an office building in San Jose.
In stark contrast, Toni Morrison has been both highly visible as a writer and hugely successful at allowing the mass marketing of her work without compromising artistic integrity. Clearly America’s most critically and commercially successful author, Morrison has tirelessly sought out her readers and worked to form literary communities around her writing, most prominently through her long collaboration with Oprah’s Book Club. Considering Morrison’s career in light of the trope of the “talking book,” in Chapter 2 I argue that her unswervingly political fiction nevertheless succeeds in appealing to a huge range of audiences. Her unique gift for welcoming academics and Oprah viewers alike into stylistically challenging, emotionally charged books also encourages a personal, readerly investment that turns consumers into stake-holders in national literary conversations about race, gender, social injustice and the quotidian struggles of love. While her professional critics tend to interpret these lessons in the context of African American literary history, everyday readers understand Morrison’s political arguments through her characters and a much broader referential lens, from William Shakespeare to Gabriel García Márquez.

The evolution of literary conversation is generational as well as digital, and if Morrison successfully adapted to the mass medium of television, younger authors are engaging in more complex interactions with the wealth of new media spawned by the Internet. Considering two “Generation X” writers who have captured national attention through particularities of authorial identity, I argue that authors as well as publishers are beginning to adapt to a shifting balance of literary power. For Junot Díaz and David Foster Wallace, novelistic style has become a vehicle for intricate metanarrative interjections, leading to narrators who live out the larger challenges of
authorial identity in a heavily mediated world. As the barriers separating readers from
ordained critics crumble online, these younger writers are increasingly interacting with
audiences that are both collaborative and vocal. For Díaz and Wallace, this has meant
a sustained engagement with a new style of intellectual discourse, the language of
nerds. Tracing these two writers’ career arcs, Chapter 3 lays out the final elements of
my model of contemporary literary culture: a reading society that demands new forms
of authorial reflexivity to mirror the collaborative, iterative nature of digital literary
conversations.

The project concludes with a brief consideration of the exciting prospects and
challenges for contemporary fiction in a world that reads more than ever but is
growing disaffected with the material realities of literary production. Digital literature
remains in many ways trapped in formal adolescence as the media foundations for
electronic writing continue their rapid evolution in both hardware and software. At the
same time, new forms of reading and modes of literary culture paradoxically reinforce
traditional genres and canonical boundaries even as the potential functions of narrative
are rapidly expanding in digital spaces. My coda considers the literary potential of
emerging digital platforms for collaborative reading and reviewing, as well as the
ways in which authorship is becoming a role increasingly distributed and multiplied
by social media, particularly the subtle fictive gradients emerging in our own stories as
mediated through platforms like Facebook. I close by arguing that contemporary
literature is, slowly, rising to meet the intellectual and ontological challenges of a
world that is increasingly defined by digital texts and governed by digital readers.
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This project began when I started to think about the networks of people and ideas that make writing possible. As I traced out the links and nodes of contemporary literary culture I grew increasingly conscious of the debts I owe to my own intellectual networks and all the ways they have made my writing possible.

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Introduction

How to Read a Thousand Book Reviews

In February of 2011 electronic book sales surpassed those of trade paperback books, leading authors and publishers to confront a growing problem with the new format (“US E-Book Surge”). Avid book fans who lined up to meet their favorite authors in person were having trouble getting their copies inscribed. Some of them asked authors to sign on the back of a Kindle or iPad, while others settled for a photograph or a quick chat (Rosenbloom). One new company is seeking to patent a system for inserting a digitally signed author page into e-books either before or after the sale transaction, allowing readers to have their copies “signed” in person or asynchronously over the Internet. The elimination of the book as a physical object brings with it a related set of existential questions about the purpose of book-signing events and the relationships between authors and their fans. As one marketer put it: “We’re struggling with the idea: is it about the autograph or is it about the takeaway that you met that person?” (Rosenbloom). Her conclusion was that contemporary readers would be more pleased with a signed digital photograph, something commemorative that could be posted on Facebook or a blog. A shift in the physical medium of the book is leading to all sorts of renegotiations about literary culture.

What does a reader gain by trading in their autographed copy of a first edition for a digital text file or a photograph? Obviously there are a number of things lost in that exchange, but the focus of this dissertation will be on what remains. Readers
attend book signings for a chance to participate physically in the social life of a book—to meet the author, interact with other fans and join a literary network built up around a particular text. The author snapshot posted online allows readers to publicly establish that sort of link and share it with other communities, reinforcing a number of key concepts that will recur throughout this dissertation. First, the photograph announces an affiliation with *reading*, the intrinsically social act of engaging with text. Second, the photograph commemorates an act of literary *consumption* and marks a text as a literary product that has been selected and purchased. Third, the photograph confers different kinds of *prestige* on the reader and the author, linking the two in a system of distinction that involves financial success, fame and literary talent. Finally, it serves as a node in many different *literary networks*, from the community of readers with similar photographs to the commercial systems that recommended and sold the book in question.

In the rest of this chapter I will explore each of these key terms in more detail by reviewing the critical literature that grounds them and then move on to a more detailed description of my work in exploring the social lives of books. I situate this research between a number of different disciplines, including traditional literary criticism, reception studies, sociology, media studies and digital culture.
Critical Foundations

Readers and Reception

The history of reading is one long conflict over definitions that was well under way when Socrates disputed the written word’s ability to convey language effectively in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, suggesting it was no substitute for hard-earned wisdom or the powers of memory. The nature of reading has likewise changed dramatically from its early days as a technology of displaced voice; under Hammurabi the punishment for a scribe who bore false witness—usually by misreading a text in recitation—was death (Fischer 27). Michel de Certeau called our emancipation from this requirement that texts be read aloud “a distancing of the text,” a reclamation of the reader’s *habeas corpus*, and as new technologies increasingly obviate the physical boundaries between readers, writers and texts, we are experiencing a second such distancing (176). Digital media push the boundaries of what text can be and do, so the challenge of defining reading in contemporary culture has only grown more challenging. This project follows the populist path, considering literature in the wild, to the extent that we can observe it. As we spend more of our critical and literary lives online, shopping for books, reading and writing reviews, cataloging our libraries and sharing our acts of distinction, the social lives of books are becoming apparent through the digital traces we leave behind. Consequently, “reading” is an activity defined here through the marks of its passage: book reviews, ratings and recommendations. It immediately follows that readers are not just individuals but groups drawn together by market forces, by interest, language, gender, ethnicity and a host of other factors.
Reading is a social enterprise. It encompasses the full range of interpretive acts, from mentally digesting words on a page to reading a text publicly in an online review.

The material history of reading is a well-developed field that needs no expansion here. It is deeply bound up with the concept of civilization itself and the transmission of knowledge across generations, and these combinations of letters “move us to tears, open up our lives to new insights and understandings, inspire us, organize our existences and connect us with all creation,” as Steven Roger Fischer describes in his authoritative *History of Reading* (7). We will return to the role of connection as a central facet of reading below, but for now it is worth contemplating the dramatic shifts that reading has undergone over its long history, from simple counting systems to the performative language etched deep into temple walls along the Nile. The codex and later the printing press multiplied the possible social contexts of reading exponentially, leading eventually to the rise of the novel, the public sphere and to book culture as it evolved throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. From the latter stages of that period to the present, the digital revolution has rapidly changed the ground rules of literary production and consumption, combining the foundational metaphors of scrolling manuscript and segmented codex and leading Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier to argue:

That new relationship is part of a complete reorganization of the ‘economy of writing.’ By making the production, transmission and reading of a given text simultaneous, and by uniting in one individual operator the tasks, until now distinct, of writing, publishing and
distributing, the electronic representation of texts annuls the old
distinctions between intellectual roles and social functions.

(27)

This blurring of traditional boundaries between authors, publishers, critics and readers
has had wide-ranging effects on literary culture, but it has also created new
possibilities for research. My project draws inspiration from the history of the book—
work such as Robert Darnton’s research on the literary and commercial transactions of
the Enlightenment in western Europe—but shifts its focus to the contemporary, where
the objects of study remain very much in active motion.

In that sense I am also indebted to researchers of literary reception, particularly
Janice Radway. Her work on the Book-of-the-Month Club will serve as a centerpiece
for my discussion of consumption, below, but her research on communities of readers
in *Reading the Romance* is equally valuable. Radway and her successors are
particularly relevant here because they combine sociological methods (such as those
employed by Pierre Bourdieu in his research on distinction) with more epistemological
arguments about reading, creating empirically grounded work on particular literary
communities. As Radway puts it,

*Reading the Romance* has been conceived, therefore, as the study of a
complex social process beginning with the publication of books within
an institutional matrix and culminating in the actual construction of
texts by real women who inhabit a particular social world. (*Reading the
Romance* 11-12)
By building her work on surveys, interviews and observations of specific reading communities, Radway establishes her work at the interface of literary criticism and sociology, identifying ways in which literary reading has measurable and powerful effects in the real world.

*Reading the Romance* convincingly argues that women read romance novels for a complex set of overlapping reasons that move well beyond simple escapism. Reading “creates a time or space within which a woman can be entirely on her own, preoccupied with her personal needs, desires, and pleasure” and at the same time “permits her to converse imaginatively with adults from a broad spectrum of social space” (*Reading the Romance* 61, 113). For many of these women, romance fiction is also significantly connected to the social experience of the “romance community,” a “huge, ill-defined network composed of readers on the one hand and authors on the other….mediated by the distances of modern mass publishing” (*Reading the Romance* 97). The dependable romance genre allows women to construct alternate versions of themselves and to feel like they are engaging in productive intellectual work at the same time (*Reading the Romance* 116-8).

Both Radway and Elizabeth Long have established a whole new field of inquiry that had previously existed “in a scholarly no-man’s land” (Long x). Like Radway, Long’s research has emphasized the importance of predominantly female readers in creating spaces for mutual affirmation, self-expression and community action, though her work focuses explicitly on social reading groups. As Long argues in *Book Clubs*, while it is true that particular acts of silent reading can be solitary and individual, both the “social infrastructure of reading” and the “habit” of reading are
intrinsically social (8-11). We learn to read together in schools, and we continue to engage in the literary marketplace through social institutions like newspapers, bookstores and coffee shops. By considering readers in social context, Radway and Long have developed a productive case study model for how readers engage with texts collectively, using literature to redefine themselves and the social nature of reading to enhance their understandings of particular texts. Using Bourdieu as a point of critical departure, Long claims that

people allow themselves to subjectively inhabit a cultural product, such as a novel, to become involved with its characters or the voice of its author, to connect with it on levels that may not be apparent to them until much later in their lives, perhaps even to be changed by that process and to embody those changes in different ways of understanding and acting in the world. (23)

This realization about literary reception is at the heart of my own project: studying the interactions of readers and texts allows us to illustrate particular kinds of cultural prestige and fame, but it also demonstrates the popular uses of literature. Readers do not merely rate and discuss books, they internalize them.

This kind of complex interaction with what many dismiss as a simple consumer product or a hidebound genre has its parallel in the kind of engagement Michel de Certeau argues for in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Lacking some of Radway’s optimism and empirical data, de Certeau framed his idealization of “advances and retreats, tactics and games played with the text” (175). Discussing the many attitudes and poses we take as we read a book in physical space, he celebrated
the “subconscious gestures, grumblings, tics, stretchings, rustlings, unexpected noises, in short a wild orchestration of the body” (175). These intense, fully invested reactions to books have their counterparts in the exchanges Radway and Long document between books and their readers. They also represent the direct expression of the reader activism we will see so much of online in the chapters ahead. The subconscious expression of involvement has its echo in the books we place in our digital shopping carts but never buy, in the way we let the cursor linger over particular temptations before we move on. More explicitly, we see these impulses of engagement articulated in book reviews where readers share all sorts of personal anecdotes, reactions and narratives, almost as if they have been triggered by the text instead of being meant to illuminate it.

At times, readers also internalize the structures and cultural distinctions created around books, for example through reading groups that tacitly “accept traditional categories of classification and evaluation” and read “classics” with the unstinting labor of “miners working a particularly rich lode” because “they offer a secure investment in self-cultivation” (Long 119). Nevertheless, Long argues that the these structures of cultural hierarchy are changeable, noting that the real definition of a “classic” is “experiential:”

A classic is great because it does something for someone: it provides a reading experience that can transcend the ephemerality and flux of daily living, and it enriches or moves the reader in such a way that it finds a permanent niche in her memory. (130)
As we will see in the case studies below, readers are often reflexively conservative when they compare a new novel to the established literary universe, but they also evaluate texts on very personal terms.

*Readers*, then, are people who engage with books as social experiences, discussing them in group fora and engaging in other more or less public acts of literary exchange. This engagement does not begin and end with the interpretation of marks on a page, but rather starts with the complex series of social and economic transactions involved in selecting and purchasing a book and continues indefinitely as the reader continues consuming, discussing and contributing to literary culture. As more of our literary lives are lived online, these expressed acts of reading, from shopping decisions to reviews, have accumulated into large data ecologies. Cecilia Konchar Farr quotes Long making this point in her own work on contemporary book clubs in the age of *Oprah*: “the activity of discussing books is quite literally productive” (54). While this dissertation does engage with television as a potential vehicle for reading experiences, particularly in Farr’s context of Oprah’s Book Club, its main focus is on the ways in which new kinds of reading communities are emerging online.

*Consuming Literature: American Letters After World War II*

To fully explore reading in contemporary America requires a brief survey of the cultural history of the United States since World War II. The emergence of the modern consumer society is a story well told in books like Lizabeth Cohen’s *A Consumer’s Republic*. Modern consumption in World War II defined itself in an
explicitly political, civic context, not a purely commercial or bourgeois-private one. Cohen writes that responsible, nationally conscious acts of shopping became “[n]ew rituals of patriotic citizenship” (67). The size of the American middle class doubled, emerging in the 1950s with a new model for cultural engagement in which consumption was specifically consecrated as a public act (69). Fuelled by this patriotism as well as newfound prosperity, the post-war public was bombarded by innovative, targeted advertising reinforcing the message that consumption equates to civic virtue and public engagement. The spending sprees of the 1950s and the financial optimism of the era also prompted the emergence of credit cards and the culture of consumer debt, offering one more avenue for private spending to become a matter of regulation, oversight and public commitment (124).

In literary terms, this was also the era in which commercial interests began to colonize previously secluded areas of highbrow literary culture. Janice Radway’s history of the Book-of-the-Month Club describes its growing power as a new kind of cultural institution that linked the emergent sense of virtuous consumption with an explicitly literary aesthetic, a wildly successful strategy that caused intense discomfort to the club’s more conservative critics:

What was most scandalous, finally, about the Book-of-the-Month Club was not simply its proximity to lowbrow culture. In fact, nearly all of its critics admitted it was nowhere near as degraded as radio or the movies. Rather, what was troubling was its failure to maintain the fences cordonning off culture from commerce, the sacred from the profane, and the low from the high. (Feeling for Books 259)
When the club was founded in 1926, it entered a literary marketplace crowded with other book clubs and brands. What it offered was a new equation for the cultural transaction of literary consumption: it “promised not simply to treat cultural objects as commodities, but even more significantly, it promised to foster a more widespread ability among the population to treat culture itself as a recognizable, highly liquid currency” (*Feeling for Books* 173). Notably, it succeeded because its founders realized that the essential commercial trick moved well beyond the particular books offered for sale in creating “a permanent circuit of transit between the agencies of reproduction and a potentially infinite set of always-desiring consumers” (*Feeling for Books* 174).

This circuit of literary desire has one modern analog in the recommendations systems on websites like Amazon, where consumer choices are evaluated for patterns that are then reproduced as suggestions like “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought.” By successfully commercializing a process of literary selection, using a prestigious panel of judges and critics who chose each month’s title, the Book-of-the-Month Club established a new kind of public consumption and a form of collective reading. Radway’s study of the Book-of-the-Month Club comes close to the research I pursue here as it explores the impact of commerce on literary pleasure. As she suggests, the club contributed to the formation of an individual happy to take up a position crucial to the functioning of the growing consumer economy, that is, the position of a subject incomplete until he or she could express the self through an elaborated language of objects. (*Feeling for Books* 300)
In a very real way, contemporary literary culture is expressed primarily through different forms of consumption, though I will argue below that acts of consumption, like acts of reading, extend far beyond the passive and solitary definitions that first spring to mind.¹

In the period since *A Feeling for Books* was published, our relationship to the objects of consumption has grown much more complex. Cultural objects themselves are far more mutable, like the e-books that are so challenging for authors to sign. We now engage in complex and collaborative acts of distinction in a way that was rarely possible before the emergence of the Internet. As Henry Jenkins explains in *Convergence Culture*, groups of consumers online engage in complex forms of textual and cultural production as a direct product of their acts of consumption, creating fan fiction, wikis and many other expressions of their interest. His argument that “media convergence refers to a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them” applies especially to literary culture, where readers are actively engaged in productive acts of reading that establish connections between books, authors and other readers (282). These new sorts of communal production are made possible in large part by the facility of sharing information and activities online, allowing for the emergence of what Clay Shirky calls “communities of practice” (100). Throughout the research that follows we will see moments in which groups of readers have worked together to create textual interpretations, shared readings and collective responses to fiction. These asynchronous accretions of literary

¹ Richard Ohmann makes a parallel argument as he studies the expansion of modern mass media at the turn of the 20th century in *Selling Culture*. Situating his work on the emergence of a “professional-managerial class,” Ohmann argues that creating and maintaining this class identity led to “the mutual embeddedness of consumption and the work of social reproduction” (118-19, 170).
commentary are not as organized as many of the groups that media scholars like
Jenkins and Shirky study, but they are persistent: Amazon has been accumulating
book reviews on many texts since 1996, creating a series of continuous, decades-long
cussions.

In short, consumption in contemporary literary culture encompasses the
browsing, selection and purchasing of books, but it also extends to forms of cultural
expression as simple as a five-star rating and as complex as a reader’s guide wiki
maintained by volunteers. These actions extend the public nature of consumption as it
was defined post-World War II into a digital realm where readers lose many potential
axes of community, from geography to ethnicity, but gain others through the
architectures of connection built into almost every culturally significant literary
website. A new public ethos of consumption has gradually overtaken the civic virtue
of the 1950s, replacing that patriotism with brand loyalty and the ethos of sharing, but
maintaining the central link between consumption and different forms of fealty and
emotional investment. Indeed, as the Internet continues to radically expand the number
of cultural options available to us, from the millions of books on Amazon to Netflix’s
hundreds of thousands of DVDs, the consumer’s investment in a product itself
increasingly becomes an anchor-point for a kind of productive community. Since so
many of these activities involve different elements of reviewing and critical
distinction, it is also worth considering the critical literature on reviewing as it inflects
this project.

Pierre Bourdieu classically defines the system of professional criticism as one
where critics “reproduce…the space within which they are themselves classified”
As the boundaries have blurred between commercial spaces for book reviewing, such as magazines and newspapers, and the publicly accessible venues of blogs and sites like Amazon, this formulation has become increasingly contingent on the boundaries of the “space” being investigated. Bourdieu’s seminal studies of artistic production in *The Field of Cultural Production* have been joined more recently by work such as James Curran’s paper on London literary editors, in which he concludes that “[b]ook reviews are a form of peer review in which writers judge other writers in a public process of symbolic grading” (236). At the same time, as Grant Blank’s *Critics, Ratings and Society* suggests, reviewers in “connoisseurial” fields like literature “are not gatekeepers—they must persuade us of their arguments” (4). Professional reviewers are acutely conscious of their positions within broader fields of cultural production as both critics and authors, and their public acts of consumption are in many ways stylized and constrained by the forums in which they are produced.

By contrast, the reviews of non-professional critics—a group so amorphous it is difficult even to adequately describe them as everyday readers, amateur readers, “real” readers, etc.—play many different games by many different rules. As Michel de Certeau puts it in *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

> To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds another production, called “consumption.” The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its
ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.

(xii-xiii)

The keyword of consumption is constantly redefined by the users of websites like Amazon and LibraryThing as they engage in very different forms of reviewing and transform de Certeau’s formulation into something more permanent and elaborate, a production that transcends this subaltern mode to reveal itself fully. For some, the comment box on Amazon is a place to complain about missing shipments or the poor quality of the book as a physical object. For others, these are confessional zones, inverting the civic sense of public consumption to make the act into a revealed private expression, much like the private/public tension common to many blogs. The sheer diversity of contemporary digital consumption reveals the truth of Bourdieu’s claim that reviews reproduce cultural space, but also demonstrates the multiplicity and ambiguity of such spaces in contemporary literary culture.

Prestige

Pierre Bourdieu’s observations of social systems rested on a model of prestige as an ordering cultural force. Bourdieu classically defined this term as “specific consecration” within a cultural field, the kind of elevation that a canonical author like Shakespeare or Mark Twain enjoys (The Field of Cultural Production 38). When Bourdieu conducted his research on distinction in France from the 1960s to the 1980s, the cultural fields he studied were only beginning the commercial transformation into today’s consumer society, and he often argued that class-determined cultural structures
were essentially unchanged from the 19th century. This divide was especially clear in
the inverse relationship between commercial success and what Bourdieu called
“cultural capital” in the “fields of production” of fine arts (The Field of Cultural
Production 74-87). For Bourdieu, the limited field of true artistic production was
always distinct from the wider zone of mass cultural production, but this distinction
has more or less disappeared, at the very least for contemporary literature published in
the United States. Bourdieu himself came to this recognition later in life, noting that
“the boundary has never been as blurred between the experimental work and the
bestseller” (The Rules of Art 347). In the contemporary landscape, negotiations for
prestige are far more complicated because cultural fields themselves are being
radically redefined as publishers, authors and critics scramble to adapt to new business
models and new media.

The notion of “cultural capital” plays a relatively minor role in Bourdieu’s
theories, but it has become the best-known element of his work in literary studies
because of John Guillory’s Cultural Capital, a work that adapts Bourdieu’s concepts
of prestige to the question of literary canon-formation. Guillory’s work departs from
Bourdieu in its exploration of cultural value, which must necessarily be at the heart of
any theory of non-monetary capital. Guillory ends his investigation of value by
concluding (quoting Marx) what we have already learned from Radway, Long and
other scholars of reception: “Production thus not only creates an object for the subject,
but also a subject for the object” (Cultural Capital 320). Guillory argues that
“‘aesthetic value’ is nothing more or other than cultural capital” and that “[w]hat
appears in the place of aesthetic pleasure in the dominant classes is the pleasure of
distinction, pleasure in the possession of cultural capital” (Cultural Capital 332, 333). Throughout his argument, Guillory adheres to Bourdieu’s original formulations of the separate fields of cultural production, particularly as he identifies the university as the center of the productive tension between the “pedagogic imaginary” and the syllabus (Cultural Capital 35).

For Guillory, the driving idea of literary prestige is rooted firmly in the rhetoric of the syllabus:

The canon achieves its imaginary totality, then, not by embodying itself in a really existing list, but by retroactively constructing its individual texts as a tradition, to which works may be added or subtracted without altering the impression of totality or cultural hegemony. (Cultural Capital 33)

This ideal of a tradition appears throughout the data explored below in the form of competing lists and list-makers: those who would categorize Toni Morrison primarily as an African American writer, as a woman novelist, as an academic, as an Oprah guest, etc. The competition of forces in the literary marketplace to categorize and contextualize writers belies the clear lines Bourdieu and Guillory draw between different fields of cultural production and sheds new light on Marx’s insight that production creates “a subject for the object.” In the original context the emphasis was solely on cultural producers such as writers, publishers and critics, but as we will see below literary consumption can reverse-engineer this process, creating new subjects far beyond the scope of a book’s original creators.
This discourse of value and the creation of literary consumer subjectivity finds its most compelling contemporary expression in Mark McGurl’s excellent *The Program Era*, where he argues that the university system has come increasingly to define literary fiction in the United States. Indeed of the four authors I study closely in this project, only one has not held a permanent teaching position in a creative writing program: Thomas Pynchon. McGurl argues that the proliferation of creative writing programs has institutionalized fiction and transformed it from a calling to a profession and that at the same time creative writing issues an invitation to student-consumers to develop an intensely personal relation to literary value, one that for the most part bypasses the accumulation of traditional cultural capital (that is, a relatively rarefied knowledge of great authors and their works) in favor of a more immediate identification with the charisma of authorship….By contrast, to read and analyze a novel in a regular literature class is to turn around and head back toward the workplace—back, that is, toward the submissiveness of homework. (15-6)

In McGurl’s formulation, the pedagogic imaginary has shifted its locus across the hall from the faculty room to the writing workshop, and from tenured professors to an almost guild-like structure of writers and student apprentices. While the school remains a hugely important site for the development of literary culture, the nature of its role is changing from the production of particular forms of knowledge (i.e. “Western Civilization”) to attitudes of consumption. As McGurl argues, students involved in creative writing programs are encouraged to think of the creative and the
critical acts as connected and immediately available to them. This new conception of literary prestige redefines “audience:” no longer a passive target for market segmentation and literary products, it is a site of active consumption, a creative workshop for prestige.

This investment in participatory literary culture has also changed the role of authors themselves as cultural figures. It is impossible to imagine a young contemporary writer successfully maintaining the anonymity that define J. D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon’s careers, if only because the system of writing workshops and institutional involvement now enrolls almost all rising stars in a public sphere of readings, classes and mutual literary engagement. This institutional impulse has been reinforced by the parallel commercialization of literary culture. Joe Moran argues in *Star Authors* that the advertising-driven journalism of the mid-century’s photo-laden magazines created a new kind of “personality journalism…by which personalities were reduced to the convenient shorthand of readily identifiable symbols…implicitly connecting life and art” (24-5). With the growing dominance of television in particular, authorial stardom became as important to a writer’s literary prospects as endorsement from more selectively highbrow critics and publications. In this way the contemporary university-based celebrity of many authors is only the latest version of a commercial system of popular authorial promotion. Writers like Ernest Hemingway and John Cheever endorsed products and, in a few cases, became literal trademarks. As Cheever put it, “I’m a brand name like cornflakes or shredded wheat” (quoted in Moran, 25).
When we step back and consider the contemporary system of literary production in a Bourdieu-esque light, we see a system in which literary consumers feel entitled to write and publish their own critical opinions, shifting the stakes of distinction into a much more populist sphere. In his enlightening work on cultural prizes, *The Economy of Prestige*, James English makes a clear case for the ways in which prizes “are our most effective instruments of *capital intraconversion*” (10). English eschews both close reading and macroeconomics as he explores this territory, arguing instead for a focus on “the middle-zone of cultural space” where writers, readers, critics, booksellers and many others engage in complex forms of cultural exchange (12). This space is dominated by celebrity, just as we would expect from a publicity system several decades further evolved from Cheever’s “shredded wheat.” But celebrity depends on audience, and one of English’s most important achievements is to document the importance of scandal to contemporary cultural prizes and prestige (205-12). The essential point here is that cultural consumers seek that “intensely personal relation to literary value” that McGurl described, and literary scandals are yet another way to personalize our relationships to authors and their positions in terms of prestige.

These new lines of connection bring me to the final nuance of prestige that I will depend on in the case studies below: its meaning in the context of network analysis. The study of relationships between connected objects has produced many methods for calculating the relative importance of those objects, but throughout this project I will be using one of the simplest metrics of prestige or “centrality” in its network-analytic sense. Those objects (or books, or people) that are connected to most
frequently by other entities in the same network have higher prestige. For example, if Amazon were to recommend the young adult megahit *Twilight* to readers on every one of its book pages, *Twilight* would be the most prestigious node in that commercial network.

Throughout this dissertation, then, I will use the words “distinction” and “prestige” interchangeably as I argue that everyday readers are playing a growing role in defining literary fame. As a keyword, *prestige* incorporates all of the threads I have woven together here. Tracing the role of the school from Bourdieu through Guillory and McGurl, I argue that educational institutions are significant not in upholding particular traditional canons but in enfranchising the literary critic and producer in all of us. This collective, popular engagement with prestige is changing the basic rules of the game of culture, allowing consumers to engage in vast collective dialogs with one another and directly with critics and writers.

*Literary Networks*

Throughout the discussion above I have described the ways in which contemporary literary culture has opened new spaces for reading and consumption. My research depends on a basic conceptual shift, moving from the protean question of cultural value that preoccupied Guillory to the study of literary networks. The decision to focus on the frameworks of cultural exchange rather than its philosophical underpinnings allows me to engage in forms of practical, empirical research. The emergence of websites like Amazon and LibraryThing has heralded a new era of
bountiful cultural data, much of it collected passively and as a matter of course, a development I will discuss in more detail in my methodology section below. These new ecologies of information, when combined with the growing sophistication of analytical tools in the digital humanities, yield entirely new perspectives on the ways in which popular audiences engage and discuss literature.

In the terms discussed above, a network might best be described as a series of lists: a list of nodes and a list of edges. In order to effectively define the network as I will use the concept in this book, we must first cover these constituent terms. A node is a cultural entity of a specific kind: in the case studies that follow I typically explore networks made up of books and/or people. These lists of entities are generated using some kind of selective algorithm (I will describe these in detail below), but a crucial element of the concept of the node is that all nodes in a particular network share some fundamental characteristic, a commonality by which an algorithm first identified them. By definition, for example, my script to locate recommendations for a particular book from Amazon will only return items the site has listed in its database. My use of social network analysis adopts the grounding assumptions of the field, that the study of relationships and organizational structure can reveal patterns and insights into the functioning of social systems. (Stanley Wasserman and Faust 16).

Consequently the entire enterprise rests on effectively theorizing the relationships between nodes, or edges. In the case of the networks that follow, these edges are also algorithmically determined by the nature of the data that is under consideration. There are many kinds of relational ties between nodes. For example, the script mentioned above might only identify edges that link nodes together according to
the “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought” recommendations that Amazon offers on most product pages (more on this below). Some edges are directed: a connection that only moves in one direction, such as a link from page A to page B. An edge with arrows pointing in both directions would be bidirectional, in a situation where the relationship was mutual. The rest are non-directed: a relationship between two nodes that has no such directional valence, like a connection between two words based on collocation. The definition of an edge depends on the network graph of which it is a part.

In network analysis terms, a network is a list of nodes and their interconnections. All networks are constrained by the boundaries we place by defining nodes and edges in particular ways. As a classic primer on the field puts it, “A social network consists of a finite set or sets of actors and the relation or relations defined on them. The presence of relational information is a critical and defining feature of a social network” (Stanley Wasserman and Faust 20). These relationships can be quantified and visualized in a number of ways, notably including the calculation of prestige, or the number of edges attached to a particular node.
Two final elements of network analysis methodology I employ in this project describe the ways in which nodes can form subgroups within a larger network. A *hub* describes a node that connects two otherwise independent groups, serving as a bridge between different communities or clusters. A simple tool for finding these clusters or groupings is the concept of the clique. “A *clique* in a graph is a maximal complete subgraph of three or more nodes. It consists of a number of nodes, all of which are adjacent to each other, and there are no other nodes that are also adjacent to all the members of the clique” (Stanley Wasserman and Faust 254). They are often referred to with a number, i.e. cliques where $k=4$, which would include all complete subgraphs containing a minimum of four nodes (like the two cliques in Figure 1). Cliques are one method for measuring the extent to which nodes in particular networks affiliate in non-random ways, clustering together into tightly interconnected groups based on some kind of mutual affinity. As Albert-Lásló Barabási noted in his survey of network analysis, clustering is not just present but
nearly ubiquitous in all kinds of social networks (49-50). In the research I have conducted, cliques often represent canonical impulses—tightly interconnected lists of texts within the larger matrix of nodes and edges that makes up the network. When I speak of groupings of nodes that are tightly connected but do not meet the strict definition of a clique, I will typically refer to them as clusters.

But let us look beyond textbook explanations of network components and consider the critical foundations of network methodology. By defining networks as cultural entities and not “actors” as the term is usually understood in actor-network theory, I am staking an important claim on the value of mapping out the traces of cultural transaction instead of attempting to follow its participants directly. It might have been possible to pursue this project with a sociological survey of the personal, professional and intellectual connections between different authors, for example. But such an exercise would have immediately encountered the challenge of defining edges and nodes consistently in the messy space of human social interaction. By focusing instead on particular cultural systems, particularly recommendations and book reviews, the networks I explore here reveal the full complexity of literary exchange in its natural habitat, as it is experienced by the agents involved. With this choice we can avoid over-investing in debates about agency and focus instead on the sustained engagements with cultural systems that constitute our literary lives. For a compelling overview of the complexities of agency, see Emirbayer and Mische.
literary study, this approach allows us to create an empirically grounded model of a literary space, which Franco Moretti suggests is “like an X-ray” revealing underlying structures hidden by the complexity of language (“Network Theory, Plot Analysis” 84).

The success of Amazon.com itself rests in part on a similar realization: an attention to networks (of warehouses, shipments, books and customers) was more important than the particulars of the actors within them. Jeff Bezos chose to start Amazon as a bookstore because the ISBN system had already made the book business a “meticulously organized” cultural network (Striphas, The Late Age of Print 102). The recommendation systems that I discuss in this project are one of the company’s most successful business innovations, and their genius is in focusing on the social lives of books instead of people. In a 2003 white paper several of architects of the “item-to-item collaborative filtering” algorithm noted its efficiency and the excellent quality of its recommendations. Instead of attempting to segment customers into “similar” groups or comparing every user’s list of purchases with everyone else’s, the company realized that placing books themselves at the heart of the equation was the only efficient way to deliver millions of recommendations in real time (Linden, B. Smith, and York). The site uses this system in various ways, such as to suggest “impulse buys” based on items a user has placed in her shopping cart, and to make user-tailored recommendations on the site’s homepage based on purchase history. But its “Customer Who Bought This Item Also Bought” feature is the purest expression of
This object-oriented philosophy, since it focalizes all relevant data through the transactions surrounding a single product.

This focus on the network instead of the actor is a deliberate effort to look at contemporary literary culture in the context of its most exciting changes. As Clay Shirky argues in *Here Comes Everybody*, “we are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations” (21). Where Bourdieu and Guillory located the spaces of cultural change in relatively constrained areas such as theater, the museum and the school, contemporary literary networks have dispersed those zones of distinction to thousands of spaces, including book blogs, shopping websites, Twitter feeds and even those personalized author photographs. The “communities of practice” I mentioned above are really networks of practice, where digital tools are becoming much more effective filters for capturing and sharing the kinds of basic cultural choices we make every day (100). If Shirky is right when he claims that “[w]e are living in the middle of the largest increase in expressive capability in the history of the human race,” the *product* of these labors will be networks of texts like those I study here (106).

By addressing the network that connects authors to their readers, this project aims to fill in another part of the gap identified by reception critics like Radway and Long between literary criticism, authorial biography and other elements of literary culture. In this I am inspired by Ted Striphas’s efforts to explore the “everyday” habits of literary culture, to “trace some of the key conditions under which those habits are

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3 Of course, these algorithms can be superseded by human interventions to promote particular titles, as Amazon occasionally seems to do.
produced, reproduced and possibly transformed” (The Late Age of Print 10). Striphä also adopts a systems-centered mentality, focusing on the details of the production network by which Amazon, for example, has multiplied the number of book titles immediately available to consumers from thousands to millions. In adapting this perspective to the more accessible and measureable networks of books, words and ideas that constitute literary culture’s digital traces, I hope to unveil a different kind of “everyday” in the asynchronous present of the Internet. There, readers are engaging in casual literary conversations that span decades, sharing a literary experience that is new to them with the next browser to arrive in the same place hours, days or years later. These networks of cultural traces offer us a way to think about books themselves as attractors and generators of social action, and in this way not just the consumers but the consumed can become productive, generating their own webs of affiliation and influence.

**Methodology**

Throughout the case studies that follow, I will rely on two basic datasets to explore the social lives of books. First, networks of recommendations based on consumer purchases drawn from Amazon; second, a corpus of professional and consumer book reviews collected from nationally prestigious newspapers and magazines along with consumer reviews from Amazon. In keeping with the keyword definition above, “network” here refers to a limited set of nodes and edges, and I will
be extracting a different kind of network from each dataset. The first of these datasets charts out recommendations on Amazon by defining books as nodes and recommendations as edges or links that point from one text to another. The second visualizes collocations in reviews of Wallace’s work, defining author names and book titles as nodes and collocations within the same paragraph as links. I generated both datasets and the attendant visualization files using a combination of Perl scripts (to gather and groom the data), a MySQL database (to store it), and the visualization tool yEd (to create the figures below).

By studying these networks side by side, we can explore the two primary spheres of public literary action: conversation and consumption. “Conversation” roughly encompasses the cultural side of the equation, represented here by professional and non-professional readers’ written reviews of books. The decline of professional book reviewing and the familiar public sphere of literary profiles, author-to-author endorsements, and other prestige-laden interactions has paralleled the rise of new digital public spaces. Websites like Amazon have succeeded not just by dint of cost-cutting efficiency but because they have fostered new kinds of community around their products, and book reviewers on their sites often engage in dialog with other reviews, creating spaces where users can form micro-communities around particular products. This growing digital ecology of voluntary contributions from readers is

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4 “Limited set” is an important term here—these networks of cultural influence are practically infinite, so the graphs here are subsets defined by reasonable artificial constraints. For example, my David Foster Wallace network of book recommendations on Amazon would begin with *Infinite Jest* and follow links to three levels of depth.

5 I use the term “community” as a way of describing the ill-defined but occasionally powerful associations strangers can form online, a group that might fluctuate between what Guillory calls an “association” to an entity with a more explicit set of shared values and sense of belonging (*Cultural Capital* 34-5).
what makes Amazon an appealing object of study for the “consumption” half of the equation. Amazon’s recommendations allow us to observe the world’s largest bookseller in its feedback loop with consumer desire and market influences.

It is also important to acknowledge the raggedly U.S.-centric nature of this study focused on American writers. The Internet is, of course, irrepressibly international and communities on Amazon and similar sites attract global participation, despite corporate efforts to segment users into national markets. Reviewers of Junot Díaz, for example, occasionally write Spanish-language reviews for the “English” editions of his work. To the extent that international participants have conformed to the American cultural structures I am studying here, they have been included because they are part of the conversation. This project does not, however, consider websites like Amazon.co.uk or reviews outside the limited scope defined in this section.

**Recommendation Networks**

Amazon offers recommendations in the “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought” format to consumers on almost every page of its site, offering a rich set of linkages between books and other cultural products. In order to model the results that a user of the Amazon website would see as closely as possible, these links were collected from the Amazon website using a Perl script that impersonated a typical user’s web browser. Of course, unlike many users of Amazon’s website, this “bot” was not a return customer with a shopping history. Amazon almost certainly tailors
most elements of its shopping experience based on the history of the user who is “signed in” to the site at the time, though in several tests items listed in “Customers Who Bought…” lists have appeared identical to authorized Amazon users and the anonymous bot. My hope is that this anonymous bot served as a consistent baseline for how Amazon might recommend books to an average, anonymous consumer. The bot impersonated a user running Linux and the Firefox web browser by using the following “User Agent” information in its requests: Mozilla/5.0 (X11; U; Linux i686; en-US; rv:1.9.0.7) Gecko/2009030422 Ubuntu/8.10 (intrepid) Firefox/3.0.7 (.NET CLR 3.5.30729).

The Perl script started off by identifying the “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought” section of a chosen book’s page—for each author in this study, I made a subjective decision about what that writer’s most popular, best-known book was. The script would identify the first ten items\(^6\) recommended from that page and store information in a local database about the book title, author, number of reviews and its unique Amazon identification number (ASIN). The script would then move on to visit each of the ten links it had just uncovered, repeating the process for a set number of iterations. For example, the typical search specified a three-iteration traversal, meaning that the script would follow first ten, then one hundred, and then one thousand links. Over the course of a few hours, the script would assemble a complete picture of the three-level network surrounding a particular author’s work. As I realized that these networks, particularly Amazon’s shopping cart-driven

\(^6\) Amazon often recommends many more items, frequently eighty or more, but only the first few are visible on a given page. Since these items are clearly sorted by relevance, I have chosen to limit my networks to those connections a user would be most likely to see.
recommendations, change over time, I began to collect data regularly, typically at monthly intervals. As the script progressed, it added this information to a MySQL database.

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<td>Seek: Reports from the Edges of America &amp; Bey...</td>
<td>Denis Johnson</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2010-08-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>727</td>
<td>0060932236</td>
<td>Essays of E. B. White (Perennial Classics)</td>
<td>E. B. White</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2010-07-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1135</td>
<td>006093686X</td>
<td>The Republic of East LA: Stories</td>
<td>Luis J. Rodriguez</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2010-07-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1606</td>
<td>0060937130</td>
<td>Dynamics of Faith (Perennial Classics.)</td>
<td>Paul Tillich</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2010-08-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2032</td>
<td>0060950103</td>
<td>La casa de los espíritus</td>
<td>Isabel Allende</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2010-08-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2279</td>
<td>0060956658</td>
<td>Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 192...</td>
<td>Frederick Lewis Allen</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2010-08-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>0060964316</td>
<td>A Short History of Reconstruction</td>
<td>Eric Foner</td>
<td>16</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>337</td>
<td>0060972459</td>
<td>Tracks</td>
<td>Louise Erdich</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2010-07-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>0060975407</td>
<td>How We Survived Communism &amp; Even Laughed</td>
<td>Slavenka Drakulic</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2010-08-01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>917</td>
<td>0060976096</td>
<td>Fiskador</td>
<td>Denis Johnson</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2010-07-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>0060976101</td>
<td>The Stars at Noon</td>
<td>Denis Johnson</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2010-08-01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Amazon Titles Stored in a MySQL Database

In the cases where I also used LibraryThing recommendation networks, the procedure was essentially identical. In my chapter on David Foster Wallace and Junot Díaz I describe user-generated recommendation networks, where LibraryThing’s participants actively suggested further reading for those who enjoyed a particular book, and then these suggestions were voted on by other participants of the site. In these instances the script also stored the number of positive and negative votes for each suggested link.

These recommendation networks are at once the most computationally mediated data in the whole project and the closest thing we have to a mirror of literary desire in the marketplace. Amazon does its best to trace the consumer id and reproduce it through recommendations, and its commercial success is a clear mark of its efficiency in this endeavor. These networks are double-reflections of that desire,
ordered first through the mechanical observations of Amazon’s algorithms (and the engineers and marketers who manipulate them) and second through the limited focal lens of the networks traced by my anonymous bots. Considering how these networks evolve over time and across the intellectual spaces of different authors allows us to reconstruct an important kind of literary acquisitiveness, the initial consumption of purchasing (but not yet, or perhaps ever) reading a book. Because Amazon collects this information passively as customers shop, it presents a particularly unselfconscious view of consumer desire as its own list of lists: books that we have and books that we want.

*Collocation Networks*

The process of assembling collocation networks is far more complicated because the data is drawn not from algorithmically generated product recommendations but from book reviews written by human beings. I began by assembling a dataset of professional book reviews and consumer reviews from Amazon. For the former, I chose to focus on a handful of nationally recognized publications with consistent patterns of reviewing in place throughout the careers of all the writers I have studied. These included both newspapers (*Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Post*) and magazines (*Nation, Newsweek, Time, New Yorker,* and *New York Review of Books*). Of course it was rare for all of these publications to review any individual text in my case studies, but collectively they yielded a consistent corpus of reviews for each writer. I should also
mention that my definition of “review” also extended to occasional author profiles and interviews where such articles were closely tied to the launch of a new book. Furthermore, some publications, most notably the *New York Times*, would occasionally run two or even three different reviews of the same book in different sections and at different times. I included all of these reviews, as well as a few articles that jointly reviewed several authors together. I assembled these reviews as a set of plaintext files from a variety of databases and digital archives, converting poorly scanned archival copies of articles into plaintext when necessary. The collection of reviews from Amazon proceeded much more smoothly with a script similar to the one designed for collecting recommendations. Reviews from Amazon were stored in a database before being converted into individual plaintext files.

Once both sets of reviews had been gathered, I used a combination of Linux shell programs and Perl scripts to normalize the data—converting names and titles in all-caps to regular capitalization, removing quotation marks and the possessive “‘s,” marking paragraph breaks with a `<p>` symbol, etc. These preprocessed text files were then run through a simple tagger program that I wrote to look for recognizable proper nouns in the reviews, tagging them and creating a basic XML file as output. This program used a dictionary I assembled over the course of the project to identify book and author titles as well as other frequent proper nouns, such as organizations, concepts and geographical locations. The script only identified proper nouns that had been correctly capitalized and spelled, with a few exceptions for common errors. This posed little problem in professional reviews, where publishing conventions had already regularized reviewing language with few typographical errors. In Amazon
reviews, however, it led to some proper nouns being excluded based on a lack of capitalization and typographical errors. This relatively strict definition of proper nouns placed the question of when a reviewer’s allusions become illegible beyond the scope of the project, allowing me to focus on a rich set of connections made by Amazon reviewers that was directly comparable to similar connections in professional reviews.

To explore how this has worked in practice, here is an excerpt from one of the XML files generated by the tagger:

```xml
<FILE NAME="nyt_drown.txt.p2.i.i.out">
  <NODE ID="1116">English</NODE> <NODE ID="UNDEF">Lessons</NODE> by <NODE ID="201">David Gates</NODE> Published: September <NODE ID="UNDEF">29</NODE>, <NODE ID="UNDEF">1996</NODE> 
  <p>
  The young <NODE ID="2086">Dominican-American</NODE> writer <NODE ID="2066">Junot Diaz</NODE> begins his first collection of stories with an epigraph from the <NODE ID="UNDEF">Cuban</NODE> poet <NODE ID="2105">Gustavo Perez Firmat</NODE> to the effect that writing in <NODE ID="1116">English</NODE> already falsifies what <NODE ID="1">I</NODE> / wanted to tell you. For readers with a taste for paradox, it makes an enticing invitation. But in retrospect you wonder what <NODE ID="2066">Mr. Diaz</NODE> is worried about; as a writer, he been dealt an ace. <NODE ID="UNDEF">Mainstream</NODE> <NODE ID="34">American</NODE> literature from <NODE ID="2116">William Bradford</NODE> to <NODE ID="901">Toni Morrison</NODE> has always been obsessed with outsiders; its <NODE ID="UNDEF">Hucks</NODE> and <NODE ID="UNDEF">Holdens</NODE> are forever duking it out with the <NODE ID="UNDEF">King</NODE> <NODE ID="1116">English</NODE> and writers as different as <NODE ID="2115">Ezra Pound</NODE>, <NODE ID="972">Zora Neale Hurston</NODE> and <NODE ID="1667">Donald Barthelme</NODE> have delighted in defiling the pure well with highbrow imports, nonstandard vernacular and <NODE ID="UNDEF">Rube</NODE> <NODE ID="UNDEF">Goldberg</NODE> coinages. Despite his professed discomfort, <NODE ID="2066">Mr. Diaz</NODE> is smart enough to play his hand for all it worth.
```
With a little close reading it becomes clear that the tagger is not perfect: “Hucks” and “Holdens” will, of course, not resolve to their novelistic references. Neither will the “King’s English,” a formulation first butchered here by the preprocessing removal of the “‘s” and then missed by the tagger. Finally, the tagger has also missed the Rube Goldberg reference. With the exception of the character names, each of these proper nouns appeared only once in the Díaz review corpus. In addition, since my case studies focus on collocations of book titles and author names, none of these references would have been relevant, though of course the dictionary would ideally include all of these terms.

As I moved through these case studies, the “dictionary” used to identify proper nouns grew to include several thousand entries. For each author I verified the effectiveness of this methodology by counting repeated nouns and phrases using an independent process, a simple Perl script and Linux shell command line tools. Any proper nouns that appeared more than twice in a given review corpus were added to the dictionary. In this instance it is also possible that a few relatively infrequent proper nouns did not make it into the dictionary, but my project’s focus has been on the centers of conversation, not the fringes, where proper nouns and collocations appeared regularly.

Once each review was processed and its set of proper nouns identified, I used another Perl program to count the number of collocations by paragraph. This data was then entered into a database as a new kind of network, with proper nouns as nodes and collocation counts as edges. Two nouns that appeared together frequently would have a strong edge linking them together, while nouns that only appeared together in a
single paragraph would have a weak tie. At this stage, the data was another kind of network, a list of lists.

These network graphs of collocations represent a particular kind of distant reading that parallels some of the analysis we all perform as readers of book reviews. Professional reviewers are tasked with establishing their subject within an existing firmament of writers, contextualizing the new work for their readers. The proper nouns that they work into reviews are often offered with particular valences, but regardless of whether the comparisons are flattering or not, these names are put in dialog with one another. As readers, we naturally expect this kind of connection to be made, and much of our training in reading at school is designed to enhance this function. We learn how to extract the substructure of context from a given piece of writing, learn the names involved and their relationship to one another. This distant reading of book reviews, then, is simply an accelerated form of this cognitive mapping, a system designed to trace the bestowal of prestige by association that book reviewers engage in constantly.

**Graphing and Analysis**

With both recommendation and collocation data stored in a MySQL database, I was now able to extract segments of data and create network graphs. I used another Perl script to generate a GraphML file, which listed the nodes and edges for a particular network in a specified format. I edited these files using the yEd Graph Editor, an open-source program developed by yWorks GmbH. Depending on the
context, these graphs are typically edited to remove extraneous nodes (i.e., in figures where I focus on the ten links from a single book), correct any encoding errors related to diacritical markings, and arranged to provide visual clarity. For collocation network graphs, the strength of connections between nodes—the number of times two proper nouns appeared together in paragraphs—is visually demonstrated by the thickness of the edges connecting them. In yEd, networks can be analyzed to identify nodes with the highest “prestige” and to explore visually obvious clusters and internal structures. The yEd software calculates prestige as I have defined it above by assigning the most central node in the network a prestige score of 1.0 and then measuring other nodes’ prestige as a percentage of this score.

In some cases I also exported network data from MySQL to a program designed to identify clustering: CFinder, a program designed by a group of Hungarian scientists working in Statistical and Biological Physics. CFinder identifies cliques in a given network using the Clique Percolation Method to find closely linked sub-graphs within each graph. Essentially, the program locates all cliques in the network that are not part of any larger clique. It then calculates the overlaps and relationships between all of these cliques to give a complete picture of clustering in the network (Palla et al.). The program is useful in this project for identifying groups of texts with strong interior linkages and exploring the question of canonicity through network relationships.
Results

Over the course of the chapters that follow, I will draw a number of conclusions from the kinds of data and analysis described above. It is worth pausing at the beginning of this endeavor to ask what the limits of these inferences might be and ask how far this empirical approach can take us in the study of literary culture. By studying networks of effects, the project necessarily effaces the roles of individual actors with a few limited exceptions. This is not an ethnographic study like some of those conducted by Bourdieu, Radway and Long, where interviews and personal observation played a major role in the analysis. Indeed, it is possible to imagine a valuable study of reading practices that traced reader reviews not by the authors and novels under discussion but by the users contributing reviews. While some consumers on Amazon have written only a handful, there is a cadre of influential frequent reviewers who have written hundreds or even thousands of reviews. However, what we gain by setting aside a direct focus on actors is a clearer view of the network itself. This approach allows us to explore crucial sectors of the literary landscape as competing powers contest it: marketers, professional reviewers, school syllabi, Oprah, and consumers themselves.

The limitations of the results, then, are closely tied up with agency. I have, at numerous junctures, explored particular reviews and constellations of recommendations, seeking to understand the particular logic behind one individual’s act of distinction or a particular motion in the cultural marketplace. But it is easy to extrapolate too far from these aggregate traces of cultural distinction into speculation about the particular choices that were involved. The more compelling, and better
grounded, results here stem from arguments about collective action and collective response: the ways in which authors and readers now engage in a dialog that disperses conceptions of individual agency into a much more complicated system with many moving parts. Consider the complexity of the Amazon cultural experience: the context of the marketplace, its recommendations and promoted items, is determined by thousands of unknown fellow shoppers whose actions have shaped the results of tailored algorithms. At the same time these results are manipulated by marketers who purchase “space” on Amazon’s sites to promote particular products and engineers tweaking algorithms, not to mention special offers put together by the website itself, data drawn from the user’s past shopping history, the cumulative evaluations of thousands of consumer ratings, and a host of other factors. In a digital landscape where the science of marketing has been working for decades on mass-producing “serendipity,” the whole concept of agency as a form of cultural distinction is compromised or, more positively, shared. In other words, the collective, persistent, tailored influences of digital culture introduce a new kind of intentional fallacy for us to contend with. My research, positioned at the intersection of literary criticism, cultural studies and analytic sociology, must avoid the mistakes of over-reading both the author and the audience.

So what can we learn about the social lives of books? Network analysis offers a number of insights: the structure of literary networks is not random, but reflects the cultural influences of genre, historical periods, ethnicity and many other factors. An author’s texts engage in interactions well beyond the scope of theme or original context, and one of the correlates to literary success is network diversity. As we will
see below, particularly in Toni Morrison’s case, major success leads to a special kind of canonicity in which an author’s work becomes a hub linking many different literary communities. Comparing different networks also demonstrates the extent to which different communities interpret the same works in very different ways. Finally, these networks demonstrate the gaps and shifts between professional critical opinion, everyday reader opinion and the market itself. These multiple comparisons can also reveal something less easily quantified, a sense of distinct styles in different networks—the way in which Pynchon’s professional critics, for example, treated his work primarily through the lens of historicism and European culture, while Amazon readers were much more inclined to approach it in the context of popular culture.

Like all research, this project is limited and contingent upon the boundaries of the data I explore below. Amazon and LibraryThing may be significant sites, but they are only two spaces where the commercial and cultural exchanges of literature intersect. The world of professional reviews is equally limited by the demands of print publications, marketing campaigns and the social boundaries that bring some books to critical attention while others languish. These datasets are core samples of the social lives of books taken from a few zones of heavy activity. The specific claims I advance in each of the case studies are empirically grounded in these well-trafficked sites where cultural distinction is produced. They are insights into particular systems for the evaluation and consumption of literary culture, and they suggest that in this arena, at least, the Internet is leading to a more engaged and active audience for books.

7 Cf. as an example my discussion of the “Franzenfreude” controversy of 2010 (Finn).
**Style: A Brief Interlude**

To complete this introduction it is important to pause for a minute and consider the role of style in my research. This is one way of describing what we might term traditional literary critical assumptions in this work—the easy leap between the meaning that we “discover” as readers of a text and the intentional choices and causal chain that we build from that experience back to the mind of the author. Rather than delving into a debate over the intentional fallacy, I aim to explain my own position on style as it emerges organically in analysis throughout the case studies ahead and to point out the limitations and possibilities of this approach. Each of the authors in this project, even Pynchon, has discussed his or her stylistic intentions at one point or another, and for most of them (but not Pynchon), they have made those aims abundantly clear over the years. As we will see in the chapters that follow, Morrison, Wallace and Díaz have each explicitly stated their intentions to recast American fiction in particular ways that involve significant political and social motives. Pynchon, for his part, clearly seems to have his own agenda in historical fiction, and we might take his general refusal to explain himself as an example of “productive silence,” which is one of the rare clues he offers to his matured self-perception as a writer in print (*Slow Learner* 23). His refusal to participate in the commercial promotion of his own work ends up as a stylistic choice in itself.

It would be impossible to ignore style in this project, if only because readers discuss it constantly. After all, style is at the heart of literature, the magic box through which information becomes art. We are just beginning to explore new cognitive
research on the complex ways in which style influences us. In more humanistic terms, the digital proliferation of media and entertainment is underscoring the hard limits of intellectual existence, and as Richard Lanham argues in *The Economics of Attention*, “the more information we have, the more we need filters, and one of the most powerful filters we have is the filtration of style” (19). This is a productive paradox for the kinds of empirical reductionism that this project engages in with its nodes and networks. Style is a practice of exclusion and refinement, but it also shapes thinking and builds communities.

Let me offer what might be an obvious anecdote to make this case. In a 2011 *New Yorker* essay, Jonathan Franzen discussed his inability to cope with David Foster Wallace’s suicide in the two years after his death and instead to “take refuge in anger and work” (82). His grueling book tour completed, Franzen writes that he traveled to a remote island off the coast of Chile which served as the model for *Robinson Crusoe*. Armed with a copy of Defoe’s novel and a small box of Wallace’s ashes, Franzen hoped to make peace with his friend’s death and his own self-alienation. In other words, the key element for Franzen’s project of self-renewal was a book. This is an experience every committed reader has had; I would wager that literary critics depend almost exclusively on reading as a way to solve intellectual problems. Over the course of the essay it becomes clear that Franzen thought through the issues underlying Wallace’s suicide and his own anxieties by working through *Crusoe*. Reading with an active mind was a process for thinking, and Defoe’s novel became a machine for

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8 See, for just one example, Blakey Vermeule’s research on the cognitive work of reading.
Franzen also discusses the theory of the novel in the essay, particularly Franco Moretti’s claims about the function of the “serious” novel in the 19th century, of which *Crusoe* is a prime example. Moretti’s essay argues that the new floods of objects and description in the 19th century novel “are an attempt at rationalizing the novelistic universe: turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all” (“Serious Century” 381). In that critical narrative, the “serious” disappears under the onslaught of modern media and the wholesale abandonment of bourgeois morality over the course of the 20th century (“Serious Century” 400). But as we will see repeatedly in the chapters below, contemporary authorial success demands a new kind of seriousness, and these authors take their tasks quite seriously, even when they incorporate comedy or satire into their repertoires. For the writers studied here, this seriousness is often bluntly stylistic: their works are frequently difficult to read, engaging modernist formal techniques to fragment narratives and disorient the reader. They wed seriousness to a new morality of critique instead of reinforcement, developing projects of cultural reform instead of supporting established principles.

For the 19th century novel, free indirect discourse proved to be a stylistic waypoint, marking the emergence of a new bourgeois society where it was a new construction between character and narrator, “the ‘third voice’ of the achieved social contract” (“Serious Century” 399). In the graphs and tables below, I am laying the groundwork for a parallel stylistic claim based not on grammatical but conceptual structures. Major components of each writer’s style in this project are variations on
intellectual discourse: parables, technoscientific, psychoanalytic and encyclopedic tropes. The networks of ideas and references that Pynchon, Morrison, Wallace and Díaz weave into their works with such frequency are also a way to validate the new reality, as Robinson Crusoe’s focus on building, making and doing did for Franzen. But the reality they validate is mediated, overdetermined, saturated with ideas, so when the contemporary novel addresses the “real world” and its “real work,” that labor is not likely to be a bourgeois trade but the work of meaning-making. In other words, these writers demonstrate the power of what we might call “free indirect reference” to describe contemporary cultural reality and captivate wide readerships. They define a new reality principle based on a logic of simile, of semiotic trading.

The way in which Díaz, for example, skillfully links his outcast protagonist to the American cultures of fantasy, science fiction, comic books and “nerd” subculture in general goes beyond simple comparison. The accumulation of these metaphors establishes a different “third voice” in these texts, defining a new kind of social contract centered on referential awareness and social positioning. This is not so different from the claims and outcomes that, say, Jane Austen implicitly endorses in her moments of free indirect discourse in Emma, but it establishes different terms for the transaction. Instead of the interpersonal, social relationship of actual voices—narrator, character, society—we get a true marketplace of symbolic exchange. Let us trade Sauron for Trujillo, Díaz implies. The costs of these metaphorical edges are never equal, never a simple one-for-one, but always involve complex and counterintuitive intellectual moves. This is what makes these gestures surprising—games of talent and skill—and is a huge part of these writers’ appeal.
In the pages that follow I will discuss style as an important factor in the critical and commercial success of these writers. Readers online have discovered the fluidity and speed with which they can align themselves with ideas, books and topics, creating new kinds of intellectual communities. Literature has always thrived on these gatherings, the communion of “breaking bread with the dead,” as W. H. Auden put it, but suddenly digital spaces for culture are expanding the feast (Levykirchstetten). Readers engage in contextual conversations that respond to authors and develop their own communities of style, such as the footnote-intensive, strikingly Wallace-like posts on the website of the Infinite Summer online reading group. These new styles of cultural exchange play a major role in the evolving social lives of books.
In early 2004, Thomas Pynchon lent his voice to *The Simpsons*, where he joined the cartoon cast as himself to endorse a first novel by Marge Simpson. Appearing as a yellow, sausage-fingered figure in the show’s distinctive style, Pynchon wears a paper bag festooned with a question mark over his head. The brief appearance lampoons Pynchon’s own carefully crafted anonymity as he dons a sandwich board labeled “Thomas Pynchon,” stands in front of a large sign pointing to his house and encourages passing motorists to “have your picture taken with a reclusive author!” Pynchon’s choice of cultural venue speaks volumes about his position as a highbrow writer and academic darling who shuns the trappings of fame.
yet still sells a lot of books. Without a doubt, Pynchon is the most active and successful American writer today to maintain complete anonymity. The most recent published photographs of him date to the 1950s (with two recent, blurry exceptions that have never been widely circulated and may not be legitimate), making the *Simpsons* debut his only sanctioned authorial image in decades.\(^9\) By all accounts Pynchon does not live in rural seclusion, as J.D. Salinger did, but rather on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where his son Jackson attended high school and had an account on the social networking site Facebook (“Pynchon’s Son a Big Man on Campus”). Well-connected in publishing, Pynchon dines with other New York authors and generally lives a normal life (Bowman). When his privacy is threatened he has been quick to call on friends and legal resources to prevent a breach, but the rarity of such instances underlines the effectiveness of his protective media aura.

One of the best ways to understand Pynchon’s complex relationship to cultural consumption is to read between the lines, as it were, of his *Simpsons* cameo. The show generates countless cultural references, miniature spoofs and parodies, but when guest stars lend their voices to participate in them, *The Simpsons* gains something more than merely another laugh. Pynchon’s bag-headed, two-dimensional appearance writes him into the ever-expanding *Simpsons* universe, and the cultural reference to a reclusive highbrow author (who is ironically soliciting for attention) becomes a kind of conquest for the show, a claim laid to another piece of American cultural real estate. This is not a groundbreaking assertion, nor is the tactic by any means limited to *The Simpsons*, but it does exemplify precisely the link between cultural consumption and reinvention.

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\(^9\) One of these images, captured and enhanced from B-roll news footage, is closely analyzed in a documentary film (D. Dubini and F. Dubini).
that is the focus of this chapter. The gesture of inscribing an external cultural text into
the ontological fabric of the narrative universe is ubiquitous in Pynchon’s works: *Against the Day*, for example, incorporates a fictional version of the inventor of Tetris,
“[his] own specialty being to arrange for bricks and masonry, always in the four-block
fragments which had become his ‘Signature,’ to fall on and damage targets designated
by his superiors” (Pynchon, *Against the Day* 123). In this instance the remorseless
descent of Tetris blocks becomes a weapon in the Great Game, a symbol of Moscow’s
hegemony crashing down on Central Asia.

Pynchon’s cameo and the reinvention of Tetris are two small examples of a
particular way in which ideas can travel between cultural works and between those
who experience them. These reformulations, remixes and parodies have been going on
for millennia, but they are particularly relevant in the duplicative paradise of digital
media. As it grows increasingly difficult to step outside of our roles as consumers of
and participants in capitalism, the remediations discussed above illustrate the
burgeoning power of literary networks. These are the webs of cultural reference and
discourse that connect works, authors, critics and readers in the textual and
algorithmic spaces of literary reception (discussed in more detail in the Introduction).
In this chapter I will argue that Pynchon’s career and his uniquely shielded fame
marks the end of an era of authorial autonomy as well as the beginning of a new kind
of reflexive engagement in American literature. We can see the expansion of this style
in many contemporary writers, notably in the deeply self-conscious inversions,
footnotes and tangents in the work of David Foster Wallace and Junot Díaz (see
Chapter 4).
The act of reading, I argue, is always a social one, and it is changing fundamentally as literary production undergoes radical transformations of its own in the digital era. Pynchon’s communities of readership offer us a valuable case study because they have been forced to engage almost entirely with his texts, and not with him. Consequently I have very little to say about Pynchon, but a great deal to share about the way his books are read and connected to other writers, texts and ideas over time. In *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1976), Pynchon wrote: “If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long” (Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* 441). As a writer, his hyper-reflexive attention to the modalities of connection and the psychological burdens of knowledge and inference makes him an ideal candidate for a study of literary networks in the digital age.

**Literary Networks and the Social Production of Time**

In my introduction, I discuss how literary networks are best approached with a set of tools drawn from several different fields, including sociology, media theory and literary criticism. As opening with *The Simpsons* might indicate, this chapter is particularly focused on the tension between commercial capitalism and high art, between buying books and reading for pleasure. Amazon, for example, operates in productive tension with the agendas of millions of readers who browse, purchase, rate and review items in its vast virtual store. In this sense, what Henry Jenkins would call “convergence” has a negative sense, a potential dystopia of deadening mutual
consensus where every product gets 5-star reviews and the critics are voted down or, worse still, can’t be bothered to contribute in the first place. The vibrancy of Amazon’s reviewing ecologies reflects the power of dissent and protest marshaled for collective action, and consumer reviews of Pynchon’s work are a particularly rich vein of contrasting opinions. The author’s career-long critique of capitalism from within attracts a certain kind of contrarian, technically literate reader, and his readership on Amazon reveals the same kind of self-conscious, paranoid embrace of cultural networks that troubles so many of his characters. Ultimately, some of Pynchon’s Amazon readers share the same resigned corporatism that fans of commoditized subcultures experience when they buy into capitalism by buying into their chosen rebellion. Others either miss the irony or ignore it, choosing to embrace Pynchon’s countercultural ethos with the intensity of true believers.

The growing ambiguity between cultural production and consumption has a further function: a reimagining of temporality. As Paul Ricoeur argues in *Time and Narrative*, time as we comprehend it is a social construct, something that we can only truly experience through narrative. The social construction of time has always been communal and distributive, but it has also historically been driven by the large and powerful entities of our social existence: railroads with their timetables, for example, or governmentally dictated work weeks and holidays. With this perspective it quickly becomes obvious that in everyday life the most valued, most ubiquitous good that is marketed, produced and consumed is the experience of time. Consumer temporality,

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10 See (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*), *Convergence Culture*. For more on the risks of “digital maoism,” see (Lanier)’s *You Are Not A Gadget*.

11 “[T]ime becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode.” (Ricoeur Vol. I, p. 52)
the satisfaction of time “well spent,” underwrites every commercial, every novel, and every act of cultural consumption. As the tools of cultural production become available on a mass scale, the marketing of time suddenly is expanding from an organized, capitalist endeavor to something much more individualistic and contingent. As Allen Bluedorn notes, “time is used to generate meaning,” and the digital era has allowed us to fluidly share temporal constructions and meanings among decentralized groups (42). The doors of textual production, particularly, have been thrown open so anyone’s words can easily be shared with millions, anytime.

The obvious finitude of our attention makes time the one resource that will remain eternally scarce: the “economy of attention” theorized by Richard Lanham and Georg Franck. While beginning with the same observation, my argument departs from Franck and Lanham in focusing on the role of consumers in constructing their own social senses of time. As a number of sociologists and social psychologists have demonstrated, Riceour’s narrative theories are in this case empirically verified: temporality and temporal concepts are socially determinate, varying across cultures, groups and geographies.12 It turns out that, at least in cultural terms, time is like reading: a social act. By accepting the power of these ontologically determining notions of temporality, we can begin to see how the “economy of attention” in the digital era can in fact split into temporal sub-communities that in some cases undermine or even replace the general economy of capitalistic cultural production.

Let us bring these strands together: the importance of authorial prestige and cultural consumption in reading communities; the changing, increasingly productive

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12 See Bluedorn and (Levine) for readings of cultural constructions of temporality.
and collaborative nature of such communities in the digital era; and the constructed, individually produced nature of human, and especially cultural, time. Literary networks model and describe cultural exchange. The nodes of these networks are books, authors, characters and other objects of literary allusion and reference. The edges or links between the nodes are references: allusions, borrowings, comparisons and other connections that readers, critics and authors make. As a whole, the network is a system (broadly construed) through which we share cultural references: casual conversation, book reviews, bibliographies, syllabi, recommendations, lists, etc. It is thus possible to map out literary networks in many different ways. Here we will trace out systems of mutual context from the proper nouns and literary references made in Pynchon book reviews over the years, as well as similar networks created by recommendation algorithms on Amazon and LibraryThing. In most cases, the data is limited, the potential boundaries of the graph limitless, and we are forced to consider more or less arbitrary subsets of the available archives.

These maps of literary networks are also temporally bounded. The accumulation of book reviews on the *Gravity’s Rainbow* Amazon page has continued steadily from 1996 to the present, and a graph of the resulting connections visualizes a temporality constructed by a reading community: in this temporal zone, the novel retains its relevance, its importance, because as a product being promoted it is always “new.” Readers respond by linking it to a wide array of “contemporary” sources ranging from the 1970s onward. Many of the images I have created below visualize just such subaltern or overlooked forms of cultural production that have accumulated slowly into monuments of community temporality made possible by the asynchronous
immediacy of the Internet. The radical openness of literary networks also means that any study of this kind is necessarily limited and contingent: we will never capture the full measure of any author’s cultural impact, any more than we could capture one reader’s full experience of a writer or text. What we can learn, however, is deeply illuminating of how authors succeed and how literary communities evolve. While these networks have always proven elusive, they are particularly important to study now, in a time when the role of the reader is changing so dramatically.

**Togetherness: Pynchon in the Literary Marketplace**

By choosing Thomas Pynchon for this study, I have selected a cultural landscape relatively uncluttered with author profiles, biographical details or even much non-literary cultural production by the writer himself. For all of his personal seclusion, Pynchon has concerned himself with “togetherness” throughout his career: the awkward marriages of idealism and selfishness, assertion and anxiety, freedom and repression that constitute the American consumer psyche: in the visualizations below, we can see Pynchon’s many interpreters pick up the fragments of his disjointed novels and create new forms of togetherness through context. Consider, for example, the dialog Pynchon was put into by *The New York Times* in their reviews of his first three novels, presented in Table 1.
Table 1: Literary References in *New York Times* Reviews of Pynchon’s Early Novels

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<td>#</td>
<td>Reference</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>V.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Pynchon</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Harry Mathews</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>H. Bosch</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Manichaean</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Jack Kerouac</td>
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<td>Clancy Sigal</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Joseph Heller</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Going Away</strong></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Catch-22</strong></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>G. Plimpton</td>
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<td><strong>Augie March</strong></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Saul Bellow</td>
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The table demonstrates how Pynchon’s work encouraged an escalating game of literary reference, no doubt inspired by the intensively allusive nature of his own prose. Beyond the sheer accumulation of references in the *Gravity’s Rainbow* review, viewing these results in table form offers us some important insights into book reviewing as a form of social intermediation. The genre requires a certain background level of literary and cultural reference in order to position the object of review for the reader. Many of the situating terms that appear in professional reviews are not presented alongside the proper nouns pictured above: picaresque, paranoid, modernist. However, book reviews also inevitably employ more direct literary references to classify the author and work under discussion, and we can clearly see Pynchon’s literary stock rising by looking at this pool of direct references. He quickly graduates from being compared other relatively young contemporary writers (Mathews, Sigal, Kerouac, Bellow) after writing *V.* to being associated with established titans like Joyce, Melville and Faulkner in reviews of *The Crying of Lot 49*. Pynchon’s second novel also attracted mass media attention through excerpts published in *Esquire* and *Cavalier*, ultimately earning middlebrow elevation from *The New Yorker* to *Newsweek*. Shorter and less intimidating than *V.*, *Lot 49* appealed both to straightforward reviewers like the *Chicago Tribune*’s Milton E. Nelson, Jr. and more “literary” critics, like *The New York Times*’s Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, who declared: “Pynchon seems to have gained confidence in his materials; he has made his principal components more compact, stripped away excess writing, and left us a streamlined doomsday machine” (Lehmann-Haupt).
By the time *Gravity’s Rainbow* arrived on critics’ desks, Pynchon had entered a new plane of literary prestige. All of the essential components of his ultimate success were in place: his strong identification with both the counterculture and discourses of technological progress; expansive, allusive, highly “literary” prose mingled with sexually and culturally off-color topics and genres; and an aggressive rejection of publicity and the biographical judgment of his work. We can see that effect here in the diversity of connections being made, spanning American and European literary cultures and relatively new fields like jazz and television. Perhaps the most striking effect is the huge temporal range of texts and ideas that Pynchon is connected to, from Noah to The Lone Ranger. As Pynchon’s most critically acclaimed book, *Gravity’s Rainbow* has also received thorough scholarly attention, and I have little to add to this critical monument. Suffice it to say that in addition to engaging once more with the battle between the technocratic mainstream and the counterculture, Pynchon clearly hones his postmodern temporal sensibilities and credentials. As Ursula Heise argues in *Chronoschisms*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* offers “a compelling metaphor of the ‘posthistorical condition,’ social temporality sped up to the point where long-term developments have become difficult to envision” (218).

The wildly diverse range of references in the *Times* review is partially a response to the almost explosively referential nature of *Gravity’s Rainbow* itself, a difficult novel for any reviewer to summarize or explain. Indeed, as Pynchon continued to turn out massive volumes (*Mason & Dixon, Against the Day*) the reviewer’s exasperation in attempting to grapple with each work has become a trope of its own. But we can also see, in the table above, *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s impact as a
conscious assault on established notions of time. By casting the posthistorical experience of temporality into the all-too-human crucible of Tyrone Slothrop, Pynchon draws the reader into deeply personal encounters with the abstractions of history. Slothrop’s journey provides suspense even though it violates all the rules of the genre fictions that Pynchon satirizes, leaving mysteries unsolved, sinister plots un-thwarted and scientific miracles unexplained. After a few hundred pages it becomes second nature to see the world according to Pynchon’s structures, to perceive causal progressions as another form of Baudrillardian simulation made up of nuanced and contingent cultural products.

We can see this manipulation with particular clarity in the way Pynchon imagines the construction of instant myths around his characters, sometimes over the course of a single paragraph or sentence, mainly for the purpose of comic effect. For example, the fecund improbability of Pirate Prentice’s banana bonanza, “yes amazing but true,” evolves over the course of Gravity’s Rainbow’s opening sections into an elaborate device that caricatures causality even as it cartoonishly celebrates it. This is a style derived from popular culture, from the myth-making of advertising and genre novels, where character types are sketched out with minimalist efficiency. After all, by offering the customer only the bare essentials, their creators allow us to power the narratives with our own imaginations, populating shallow descriptions and faint outlines with our own compelling emotional furniture. Pynchon elevates this device to a signature genre style, creating hints and gestures toward plot in the same way as he

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13 Cf. also Stefan Mattessich: “Like Anti-Oedipus, Gravity's Rainbow is a virtual book in this respect, organized around the fourth-dimensional vector of a desire to narrate the deeply implicated orders of discourse in late capitalism” (17).
summons characters from central casting. The more extreme the narrative compression, the more he leads us not just to fill in the blanks but to question the causal fabric of the universe as a whole.

The intricacies of *Gravity’s Rainbow* also have a separate temporal effect external to its ontological games about causality. At a time when television came to dominance and the rest of the American cultural apparatus was reconfiguring itself in response (a theme later developed in *Vineland*), *Gravity’s Rainbow* iconoclastically lengthened and complicated the aesthetic experience. The *New York Times* review identified the novel’s difficulty (“bonecrushingly dense”) as a crucial distinguishing feature:

“Gravity’s Rainbow” is longer, darker and more difficult than his first two books; in fact it is the longest, most difficult and most ambitious novel to appear here since Nabokov’s “Ada” four years ago; its technical and verbal resources bring to mind Melville and Faulkner. (Locke)

This sense of density describes both the narrative and the allusions of the text, and the review makes it clear that the cultural richness of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is an important part of what makes it a serious, ‘ambitious’ novel. The goal here, as the *Times* points out, is a cultural product that “doesn’t feel ‘together’” (Locke). If “togetherness” is the marriage of aesthetic perfection and real pleasure as well as advertising and consumer anxiety—the normative ideal of consumption, viewed through Pynchon’s cynical lens—*Gravity’s Rainbow* sunders the union between readers and the novel as a
conforming cultural product, but maintains the desire to read. The consumer sublime becomes the paranoid sublime as Pynchon drives his readers into a paradoxical stage of cultural attention.

Table 2: Proper Nouns in Professional Reviews of Gravity’s Rainbow

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pynchon</td>
<td>112</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slothrop</td>
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<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>Europe</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>Africa</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Oswald Spengler</td>
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<td>Tristero</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>Freud</td>
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<td>Nabokov</td>
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<td>Roger Mexico</td>
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<td>God</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Ishmael</td>
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<td>Faust</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hieronymus Bosch</td>
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<td>Malcolm X</td>
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<td>Russia</td>
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<td>South-West Africa</td>
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<td>Ada</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Cornell</td>
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<td>Enzian</td>
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<td>Jessica Swanlake</td>
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<td>King Kong</td>
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<td>Marvy</td>
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<td>North Pole</td>
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<td>Vonnegut</td>
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<td>Berlin</td>
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<td>Boston</td>
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<td>Chinese</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duino Elegies</td>
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<td>Emily Dickinson</td>
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<td>Goethe</td>
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<td>Grail</td>
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<td>Herbert Stencil</td>
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<td>Imipolex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lenny Bruce</td>
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<td>Los Angeles</td>
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<td>Peenemünde</td>
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<td>Rhine</td>
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<td>Roseland</td>
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When we expand our focus to include a larger array of professional reviews from 1973 (Table 2), we can see the elaboration of the themes just identified. While cultural and literary references still appear in amazing breadth, it is clear that professional critics saw *Gravity’s Rainbow* primarily as a work of historical fiction, linking the novel consistently to the cultural and historical nodes of the Nazis and World War II: Spengler, Wagner, Lang, Hiroshima, etc. The most common literary link was to Rilke, whose *Duino Elegies* did so much to inspire the novel, and what we might call the background cloud of reference—single or occasional mentions like Auerbach, Von Braun, Heisenberg and Wittgenstein—has a distinctly German character. Of course, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is not really a historical novel, and the references to World War II here do not conform to historical expectations: Hitler, Mussolini and other familiar figures are noticeably absent, while cultural icons like Spengler and Wagner play a huge role, far outpacing their presence in the text itself.\(^\text{15}\) The overwhelming majority of period references here are to poets, composers and philosophers; in aggregate, if not individually, *Gravity’s Rainbow* prompted reviewers to attempt, or at least grapple with the idea of, a kind of Teutonic cultural recovery twenty years after the war. Conversely, embracing the novel’s European side leads to deemphasizing its cultural roots in the U.S., a geographical shift away from the uniquely American concerns of *Lot 49*. Of course there are a number of American

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T. S. Eliot</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tristan</td>
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<td>Ulysses</td>
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<td>Valhalla</td>
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<td>Webern</td>
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<td>Yeats</td>
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\(^{14}\) Many near-identical references (i.e. “Tristan and Isolde,” “Tristan-and-Iseult”) have been elided to reduce clutter.

\(^{15}\) A cursory Google Book search reveals only two explicit references to Wagner the composer, and none at all to Spengler. Even accounting for potential scanning errors, this is radically disproportionate. *Gravity’s Rainbow* – Google Books, http://books.google.com/books?id=iPDGp7VT8H8C.
references present in smaller numbers, but they are much more heavily weighted toward popular culture and non-literary media (King Kong, for example, or Lenny Bruce) than the comparable German references. The heavy focus on Pynchon’s connections to continental philosophy, to classical music and to painters Munch and Bosch marks his elevation to a new cultural plane, one where readers are expected not only to recognize such references but to find them helpful guide stars in a book review.

If the professionals introduced Gravity’s Rainbow primarily in the context of German cultural history, while still recognizing its wider net of allusions and references, readers have taken remarkably different tacks in describing the novel. When we consider the accumulated reviews of Gravity’s Rainbow written over fifteen years (and counting) by Amazon customers (Table 3), the literary networks they construct demonstrate not only different cultural priorities but a much more diffuse and, most importantly, contingent sense of temporality. A book review published in a printed newspaper or magazine carries with it particular temporal imperatives for the reader: the book under discussion is new and fresh with cultural potential. In another day, week, or month, the nature of the medium will require that a different book be considered in the same space, displacing the old review. The “news” of the professional review dies quickly, surviving only on dust jackets and through the occasional bookseller who provides review texts to book browsers. Given this tight temporal constraint, critics work with the imperative to categorize and locate new books within extant cultural domains, establishing a book’s worth and thereby, implicitly, the worth of the reviewer and the publication. It is no surprise that so much
critical attention was directed toward *Gravity's Rainbow* as a novel of history and high culture, or that so many reviewers traced its cultural networks and production around World War II.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proper Nouns in Amazon Reviews of <em>Gravity’s Rainbow</em></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pynchon</strong></td>
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<td><strong>America</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Ulysses</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Finnegans Wake</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Europe</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Wallace</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mason &amp; Dixon</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Pavlov</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Amazon</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Vonnegut</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Naked Lunch</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Vineland</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Nazi</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Borges</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Blitz</strong></td>
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<td><strong>WWII London</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Enzian</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Herero</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Stephen King</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Freud</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Roger Mexico</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Viking</strong></td>
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<td><strong>I.G. Farben</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Heisenberg</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Charles Chadwick</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Dreiser</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Dean Koontz</strong></td>
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If professional book reviews are shaped by their medium, so are the amateur reviews posted on Amazon. By most accounts the largest bookseller in the world, Amazon has claimed its dominant position not just by underselling traditional stores but by retaining its customers with a variety of strategies designed to build contextual connections. It solicits for and maintains one of the Internet’s largest open archives of text written by everyday users; these reviews are available forever after they are posted. As long as we accept the company’s profit motive as an editorial constraint, one that does not differ fundamentally from the various constraints that determine what gets printed in The New York Times, we can approach the site’s customer reviews as another source of valuable, if limited, data. We can gain valuable insights into the behavior and choices of a huge number of book readers by studying the ways Amazon attempts to encourage and predict their cultural choices. The basic genius of the site is the ease with which readers can communicate among themselves.

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16 We can see another form of constraint in Amazon’s own editorial review of Gravity’s Rainbow. The first line: “Tyrone Slothrop, a GI in London in 1944, has a big problem.” (Appelo).

17 Amazon sometimes removes reviews it deems offensive, useless or otherwise unwanted. There is little evidence for extensive manipulation of these reviews by the company, though it is not uncommon for companies or new authors to recruit positive reviews for their products or books on the site.
The simple but profound differences in the material (or immaterial) production of these customer reviews create a much more freewheeling, contemporary web of reference online. Reviews link Pynchon with experimental writers of various schools from William Burroughs to David Foster Wallace, popular novelists like Stephen King and Neal Stephenson, and “American originals” (to quote one of the tags Amazon users have associated with *Gravity’s Rainbow*) like William Gaddis and William Faulkner. The sheer range of cultural reference dwarfs the professional reviews, bringing together Shakespeare and Dean Koontz, Coltrane and Wittgenstein, Cadmus and *Finnegans Wake*. Towering above all of these references, however, is the figure of the ego, the ubiquitous “I” of the personal review that is almost completely effaced in the voice of the professional book review.

These frequent incursions of the personal into a space nominally reserved for Pynchon’s work are as diverse in genre as they are in tone, ranging from angry rants and personal anecdotes to studied emulations and parodies of professional journalism. The presence of the self here reinforces the heavy emphasis on subjectivity visible everywhere on the Internet but particularly on websites like Amazon. Reminders of subjective choice and communal action are ubiquitous there, from the personalized greeting at the top of the page to the ratings, recommendations and products that the site selects for your perusal. The central status of “I” online breaks down a number of the cultural constraints imposed by news media formats. Timeliness, cultural authority and the ideal community of readership are all redefined around you: what you might like to buy right now, whether it was published last month or last decade, and whether the “people like you” number in the tens or the thousands. The “I” becomes the most
productive node in the literary network created around a book or idea, the largest producer of new connections and the one presence that is always centrally located, no matter where one follows the links. As readers, Amazon says to us, we are the prime engines driving cultural connection, the instigators of new networks, as iconoclastic and complexly allusive as Pynchon in their own fields of production. The idea of value (as measured by five-star ratings and the number of reviews) becomes crucially distinguished from price. Of course, to press this point too hard is to realize that Amazon’s rhetoric can be just as deceptive as the mantle of cultural authority adopted by a *New York Times* book reviewer. Ultimately, the production of literary networks and cultural value is only worth something to Amazon if it can be monetized. How often do the site’s recommendation engines point us to novels they want to sell instead of novels they believe we’d enjoy? How often are the groundswells of consumer-driven cultural production undermined by the plate tectonics of old-fashioned marketing? Whatever the answer, the sheer scale of consumer activism—over three hundred reviews for *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and countless millions in aggregate—belies any dismissal of the site’s collaborative networks as mere marketing manipulation. Most participants in the reviewing culture have little or no financial stake involved.

If reviewers saw *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a kind of divisive, complicating novel, breaking apart accepted standards of historicity, community, causality and narrative action, the reviewers on Amazon can be seen as agents of a new “togetherness,” bridging the gaps between the novel’s iconic high cultural status and its various forms of subversion. The accretive timelessness of the web, or at least that sustained illusion, also promotes an entirely different kind of evaluation. Later reviewers find themselves
in dialog with earlier posts as much as with the novel itself or cultural third parties. Amazon’s medium encourages readers to think about texts in terms of lasting impact as well as personal pleasure, to consider each book as an essentially atemporal product—the opposite of the rapid shelf turnover in a typical retail bookstore. The architecture of ratings leads reviewers to address their comments to a community of readers and potential readers, a self-selected group that is subtly distinct from the audience of a newspaper book review (defined by a subscription choice, not interest in a particular book). Anyone can vote on particular reviews as being “helpful” or “unhelpful,” propelling the most popular (often the most community-oriented) to the main page for the novel, and thus elevating those select amateurs to the same contextual plane of authority as professional reviewers and Amazon’s own product descriptions.

One of the most “helpful” reviews on the *Gravity’s Rainbow* page addresses Pynchon’s intellectually stimulating work explicitly:

I believe that one of Pynchon's goals is to dare the reader into reading this book. Simply put, he wants us to work. Kierkegaard said that being a Christian should not be an easy task. The same is true, I think, in literature. For, the safer literature gets, the more it comes to resemble TV. (jjreid)

The reviewer celebrates the “work” involved in cultural consumption and the ways in which it leads to its own form of production. Like living a Christian life, the calling of literature requires a work ethic, a commitment to intellectual risk, and the potential
reward of cultural cachet. As literature gets safer, it becomes a more directly commercial pabulum designed to soothe and confirm, rather than trouble and question, our basic assumptions. The work that this reviewer refers to is what we described earlier as the opposite of the television trend—difficult, recondite, an intellectual challenge. No doubt Pynchon’s “dare” to his readers inspired more than a few of the consumer reviews of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The challenge is not just to read his books but to engage in particular kinds of productive action based on the work of understanding. The literary networks that Amazon reviewers create in many ways build upon the cultural foundation of professional reviews, but they have expanded dramatically into a living web of reference.

**Net Work: Mapping Pynchon in America**

Book reviews, whether they are commissioned from professional reviewers or composed by enthusiastic amateurs, are only one measure of the literary networks a text can produce. Consider the lasting inclusion of Pynchon’s novels on college syllabi, summer reading and “Great Books” lists, and their presence in thousands of libraries. While many of these influences would be difficult to measure rigorously, the Internet provides a number of other indices of cultural connection that are more easily mapped. As we discussed earlier, Amazon encourages the development of several different kinds of connection, from book reviews and tag clouds to the more passive (but deeply compelling) record of what books people actually buy. Developing predictive intelligence about the relationships between books and other products not
only allows the corporation to sell more but is vital to the general success of its massive, distributed warehousing enterprise, and we can safely assume that Amazon devotes considerable resources to honing its methods. Mapping out these networks as reported through Amazon’s “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought” feature reveals a specific intersection of taste and commerce. Not everyone who buys books reads them, and vice versa. The “work” at the heart of Amazon, however, is precisely at the intersection of consumption as an intellectual and as a capitalistic activity. Customers generally contribute reviews for the purely cultural gains of altruism and recognition, and yet they also do so in full consciousness that their labor improves and extends a fundamentally capitalist machine. To publish one’s own review is to turn literary commerce into a collaborative enterprise, but we can also see such networks emerge when we consider only the financial transactions involved. While Amazon may well manipulate these recommendations to promote particular books, they still ultimately approximate the company’s overarching interest in selling as many books as possible to customers who will enjoy them and come back for more. The recommendations maps below are a corporate mirror of consumer desire: the world’s largest bookseller offering its best guess on what you might like to read next.

The “Also Bought” network for Pynchon’s books provides a striking glimpse into the relational structure of publishing as another kind of temporal construct: the book as classic, as great work. As one might guess, consumers are generally motivated by strong emotion to share their thoughts: three and two star ratings are the least common for _Gravity’s Rainbow_, with most reviews granting either five stars or one.\(^{18}\)

\(^{18}\) Customers were four times as likely to grant the book five stars as one star.
In contrast, the measure of sales is much more impartial because it requires no direct action on the part of the user. The result is a network of consumption, accrued over time, and subject to manipulation by advertisers, journalists, literary biographers, college professors and others with cultural influence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these connections are far more tangled than the relatively straightforward exploration of authors and texts referenced in reviews. For each book on Amazon, the company offers several “Also Bought” selections on the product page, but these are displayed with buttons indicating that many more options are also available. Even when mapping out only the top ten books recommended for each title, the network of connections quickly expands into an intricate web.¹⁹

Figure 4: “Also Bought” Amazon recommendations for Gravity’s Rainbow (1 level)

¹⁹ This data was collected in April 2011.
The graph\textsuperscript{20} of connections emanating out from \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} combines elements of the professional cultural evaluations of Pynchon, the links created through amateur reviews and a distinct third element. Unlike our previous figures, this commercial network resembles nothing so much as a college syllabus. The imaginary course might be titled “The Contemporary Novel,” “Postmodernism,” or perhaps “\textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}: Context and Consequences.” Pynchon is situated here in a starkly male, contemporary milieu from DeLillo to Wallace. The notable absence of Burroughs and Stephenson, who both played major roles in customer reviews, is striking, as is the presence of Weisenberger’s companion guide among the top ten connections, when so many other authors dominated reviews. Weisenberger’s guide suggests a serious commitment to the hermeneutics of Pynchon and the novel as work to be undertaken. At the top right corner of each node is a measurement of its relative prestige within the network, with 1.0 being the highest score. From these numbers, which I have roughly approximated by positioning the most prestigious nodes at the center of these images, we can see that \textit{Infinite Jest} is more central to this network than most of Pynchon’s own novels, suggesting the degree to which the two authors have become related in the marketplace.

In fact, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} is closely associated with four books that Pynchon didn’t write: in addition to \textit{Infinite Jest}, Wallace is represented with \textit{The Broom of the System}, and Don DeLillo makes two appearances with \textit{White Noise} and \textit{Underworld}. As we will see in Chapter 4, Wallace is an unusually “interior” writer whose works almost always cluster tightly together. The fact of their overlap with Pynchon here

\textsuperscript{20}This figure and the images that follow were created using yEd Graph Editor, an open source graph editing package (yEd Graph Editor).
signals both Wallace’s continued elevation into the postmodernist pantheon of writers and Pynchon’s broader integration into a high canonical status of his own. These recommendation lines indicate that statistically significant numbers of people are buying Pynchon, Wallace and DeLillo collectively. Just as striking is the fact that Wallace gets recommended from DeLillo but not vice versa—at the point in time this data was collected (April 2011), Wallace is enjoying higher prestige. This is likely a short-term market effect from the fresh publication of his posthumous novel *The Pale King*, but it still serves to place Pynchon’s cultural position in context. Wallace is being compared to Pynchon before other writers here, and Pynchon is effectively serving as a nexus between the recently elevated Wallace and more established writers in the same literary subfield.

Expanding our view out to a second level of “Also Bought” links, the tangled web of Pynchon novels turns out to be one family in a small neighborhood of jostling literary tribes that also include DeLillo and Wallace (Figure 5). These three writers, particularly Wallace, have relatively interior networks with few connections to the outside, suggesting that their work is in some way commercially distinctive, leading readers to return for more of the same. Taking up the theme of prestige, *The Pale King* has only one, intriguing connection from the Pynchon cluster: a recommendation from *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion*. This seems to suggest that the two writers are being brought together by “serious” readers with intellectual motivations, as opposed to other kinds of events which can motivate this sort of link, such as movie tie-ins and *Oprah* selections. Instead, we can think of these dotted circles as spheres of authorial influence, and many of the most interesting connections here are being made in the
interstitial spaces between clusters. There we can see gestures toward other literary
genres as well as a glimpse of a seemingly higher literary grouping. Cormac
McCarthy, Philip Roth and William Gaddis, for example, all suggest different
interpretations of contemporary literature. Meanwhile Lot 49 connects Pynchon to
what we might call the high canon of American literature, crossing genre and period
barriers to link together Allen Ginsberg’s Howl, two Toni Morrison novels and Ernest
Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises.

In this second order view, the question of directionality becomes more
important. Pynchon points to White Noise (that is, Amazon recommends White Noise
to viewers of the Gravity’s Rainbow page), which in turn points to Beloved. But where
the link between Beloved and Lot 49 is bidirectional—a mutually reinforcing literary
connection—White Noise appears here on a lower rung of prestige, recommending
Beloved but receiving no link in return. The network is as adaptable as it is tenacious:
reviewing these networks over time reveals that some forms of canonicity are fleeting.
When I began first mapped out Pynchon’s connections in the summer of 2009, Alan
Moore’s graphic novel Watchmen was recommended from Gravity's Rainbow, likely
as a promotional effort linked to the film adaptation that came out at about that time.
That single edge connected Pynchon to a parallel universe of graphic novels, comic
book collections and commentaries.
In general, however, these networks remain quite stable, particularly among established authors like those mentioned here. The configurations among them occasionally shift, but the players remain fairly constant. The system as a whole demonstrates the effectiveness of Amazon’s feedback loop at integrating cultural and economic data, which both shapes and is shaped by millions of individually weighted clicks and choices. Unsurprisingly, the most prestigious text in this network is Pynchon’s most accessible and probably most-taught novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*.21

Of course, if we were to expand the frame of reference farther, we would discover that every node on the apparent fringe of this network is really the heart of its own small universe. The two Morrison novels expand to include a whole constellation of her work, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* goes on to span Michael Chabon, Don DeLillo, Pynchon, Edwidge Danticat and a host of other writers within its orbit. The value of this close-cropped network view, however, is to explore small neighborhoods in a potentially infinite landscape of books and recommendations. Pynchon remains tightly clustered and in the mechanisms of the marketplace he is drawn closely to only two other authors, both contemporary. Instead of seeing his work linked primarily to rivals from the 1960s, 1970s or beyond, he is being categorized here as *au courant* and very much at the heart of the current American literary game.

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21 I will discuss the impact of schools and syllabi in more detail in Chapter 2.
Figure 6: LibraryThing Recommendation for Gravity's Rainbow (2 Levels)
Where the “Also Bought” maps demonstrate consumer behavior with some degree of corporate data manipulation, similar maps from the website LibraryThing chart out a different subset of the reading community (Figure 6). Demanding more activity than merely shopping, LibraryThing bases its recommendations on the books and ratings its users have contributed to their online libraries. Constructed as a site for social reading, LibraryThing encourages users to list the contents of their bookshelves, to rate their books and to discuss them—all with no direct commercial pitch. Users can follow links to Amazon or other booksellers, but the site does not encourage sales. Heavy users (who wish to list more than 200 books online) must pay for an annual or lifetime membership—this “entrance fee” creates the implication of a commerce-free zone on the site. Ironically, the company is now owned by Amazon, and it seems likely that the book behemoth will use LibraryThing for market research. The community, however, doesn’t seem too troubled by this, and the site has been described by Publisher’s Weekly as the most active of its kind (Schultz).

The contemporary atmosphere of Amazon’s “Also Bought” lists marks a sharp contrast with LibraryThing’s network of book recommendations emanating from Gravity’s Rainbow. Visually, LibraryThing’s network is more diffuse, showing fewer obvious clusters of interconnected books and a much more intricate web of overlapping authors and texts, suggesting the kinds of expansive networking inherent in a library catalog. The map’s cultural depth is also visible in its contents: here Pynchon is linked to Jonathan Franzen and Thomas Mann as well as Nabokov, and the network as a whole is remarkably diverse. In the third level (not shown), it ranges

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22 This data was collected in the summer of 2009.
from obscure short story anthologies to Kathy Acker and William Burroughs to works that are effectively invisible to the Amazon network: Pierre Bourdieu and Stephen Fry, for example. If Amazon’s appeal to community is ultimately based on consumerism, LibraryThing attracts users with a fondness for catalogs, bibliographies and collecting. The site features a number of “legacy libraries” which recreate the archival holdings of “famous readers” like Ernest Hemingway and Walker Percy alongside the listings of everyday users. The bibliographic ethos creates a more scholarly network around Pynchon as well, leading users to catalog an extensive cluster of secondary literature on Pynchon, suggesting the importance of “serious” reading to them.

This plethora of context comes despite the fact that on average the LibraryThing network has fewer links to share: in the two-level networks shown, Amazon nodes averaged 5.7 links, but LibraryThing nodes averaged only 4.8. Visually it’s possible to discern this fact in the relatively uncluttered interior spaces within most of the dotted ellipses. Books by the same author are connected together, but not with the same intensity. David Foster Wallace only has five books here, compared to twelve (counting guides and criticism) on Amazon. Discarding his many secondary texts, Pynchon has six volumes of fiction here, as opposed to eight on Amazon. These reductions in the relative gravitational pull of each author makes space for more criticism and more single-link spurs near the edges of the diagram.

The most striking difference between the networks, however, is the fact that in this graph Mason & Dixon is Pynchon’s most central novel, receiving links from 19 of the 46 nodes in the network, including several DeLillo and Wallace novels, Gaddis,

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23 Amazon sells those books too, of course, but the number of novel readers interested in theory is far too small for the arrows of recommendation ever to point toward the critics.
and a handful of critical texts. From a stylistic perspective, I would argue that this is a total inversion: if *Lot 49* is Pynchon’s most accessible book, *Mason & Dixon* is the least, as it is not just long but written in a mock-18th century dialect. For readers on LibraryThing, this inaccessibility is arguably part of its charm, and the fact that it requires a battery of interpretive guides only makes it more of a read. This inversion (and the genre tone of the network) suggest that LibraryThing users are not really a “general” readership, but a more focused group of book lovers, the kind of people who would take pleasure in *actively* cataloging and sharing their libraries.

Amazon and LibraryThing offer two glimpses into new spaces of literary consumption that would not exist, much less be visible, without the Internet: the (more or less) feedback loop of literary desire and the intellectual reactions of a specific, “serious” readership. The “Also Bought” networks passively record consumption and trace out some of the associative paths that literary works weave through the marketplace. By contrast, the sites’ reviewers are engaged in a more active kind of cultural collaboration, describing and classifying books, fitting them into established cultural networks, and making them parts of personal literary spaces—libraries, thematic lists, “favorites,” and so forth. For all of the obvious connections made in these networks, they are not always determined by a predictable cultural logic. In this way books not only become integrated into culturally complex and idiosyncratic acts of identity-formation, they also take on new roles themselves. On LibraryThing,

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24 For example, Pynchon penned an introduction for long-time friend Richard Fariña’s *Been Down So Long it Looks Like Up to Me* (1966). Fariña’s novel does not appear in either the Amazon or LibraryThing recommendation maps for Pynchon within six or fewer degrees of separation. Pynchon, however, is among the first authors recommended to readers of Fariña by both sites. I am grateful to Sara Schmidt for asking me about Fariña’s role in my data.
Pale Fire is an intellectual junction tying together a diverse host of literary genres, while Mason & Dixon turns into the neutron star of the tight Pynchonian universe, attracting various orbitals with its forceful density. The aggregate decisions revealed here are not focused solely on the act of reading or cultural consumption itself, but on the new zones opened up by those experiences.

These networks of cultural consumption are palimpsests of choices, intellectual aspirations, and personal literary odysseys, and they are also flowcharts of temporal production. The accumulated choices made by thousands of purchasers do not necessarily reveal what people read or enjoy, but they do reveal the channels along which attentive energy and literary desires flowed, however briefly, through a digital shopping cart into a new material good. The consumers’ role in structuring their time, in defining an ordination of leisure and purposeful, consumptive desire, is revealed in the networks of books drawn together by aggregate behavior. The books, directional links and prestige measures represent a topography, a landscape of time in its aspirational mode—a landscape of desire. Browsing for books, selecting and purchasing them, is a declaration of temporal independence. Amazon encourages us to think of each purchase as an entry in a tally of personal growth and enjoyment as well as a blueprint for the future cultural factory we will create by consuming this product, by integrating and adding to its literary networks in our own minds and, perhaps, in reviews and new exchanges.
Under the Rainbow: Reader Networks and the Production of Temporality

People write book reviews, purchase novels, rate products, and evaluate culture every day, generating a constantly changing ocean of cultural reference and contextual networks. The argument I make here, that Pynchon’s work particularly evokes this kind of connection-making, can be applied to other authors, but few other writers inspire the kind of dedication his readership has consistently shown. It is quite rare for living authors to see their academic fame embodied in a single-subject journal like *Pynchon Notes*; just as unusual is the proliferation of Pynchon websites, wikis, and Pynchon-L, a mailing list dating back to at least 1992. More generally, Pynchon’s fusion of deeply mathematical, techno-managerial themes with the subversive affect of the counterculture make him an ideal spokesman for the highly networked paranoid sublime that is the Internet. Pynchon’s stylistic gifts as a writer allow him to operate simultaneously in a number of cultural discourses, and his novels have given him, as one critic put it, “an extraordinary relationship with the common reader….one encounters housewives, medical students, piano teachers, librarians, and high-schoolers [who read his work]” (Cowart, 5). His appeal lies at least as strongly in the histories and accepted temporalities he deconstructs as the various literary genres and bodies of knowledge he introduces to his readers.

This subversive motivation is nicely illustrated by one of Pynchon’s rare interactions with the machinery of public attention. In 1974 he won the National Book Award for his new novel25 and sent comedian Irwin Corey to accept his prize. Shortly afterward the Pulitzer Prize committee withheld its fiction award for the year rather

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25 It was co-awarded to Isaac Bashevis Singer for *A Crown of Feathers*. 
than risk similar mockery by accepting *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the top choice of its judging panel (Royster, 3). As James English argues in his discussion of the decision to send in Corey, the move was carefully calculated.

This was not exactly a way to renounce the symbolic and material profits associated with the prize. The event increased Pynchon’s specific visibility as an ‘invisible’ reclusive writer, thereby augmenting both his celebrity and his special symbolic position as an artist who shuns celebrity. (223)

In fact, Pynchon’s choice of representative was truly inspired. Corey delivered a mock-academic lecture that juxtaposed academic-sounding phrases and political humor to create a meaningless, humorous collage of high literary language. On one level, Pynchon was mocking the pomposity and seriousness of the awards process, and his move probably appealed to many middlebrow readers who felt that the selection and ceremonial events were elitist and self-laudatory. On another level, Corey’s Monty Python-esque, high concept spiel, with its echoes of Beckett and Dadaism, was just as appealing to highbrow literary readers who found the National Book Award a travesty of commercial interests over artistic merit.

More profoundly, the Corey acceptance speech made explicit for a moment the central tension of languages at play in Pynchon’s work and their role in creating the anxious togetherness that underlies intellectual communities. Pynchon’s work satirizes the dark linkages between (among other discourses) American technological progress,

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26 It seems Viking’s president, Tom Guinzberg, came up with the idea and suggested it to Pynchon, who approved, which indicates that the gesture was certainly not a rebellion against commercial obligations (Knipfel).
its aggressive search for a pedestal in history and the consumerist id; in doing so it creates its own paranoid style of fear, fate, tentacular corporations and an implicated counterculture. As Ralph Ellison put it when introducing Corey to the podium, “Gravity’s Rainbow…bridges the gap between two cultures and puts the world of manipulation and paranoia within the perspectives of history” (Corey). This is an imagined community, to take up John Guillory’s use of the term, one that encompasses not just academia but a broader American public. Corey, operating in parallel to Pynchon, was producing his own satire of shared cultural language and by extension his own fractured imagined community, one his listeners had to knit together from his convoluted and erudite linguistic performance.

Pynchon’s general abdication of the modalities of popular success and his specific mockery of the National Book Awards only highlight the attitude his fiction displays toward reassuring, normative conceptions of history and progress. The ethics and the depravities of consumption are always at the forefront of the ontological battles he stages, from Benny Profane’s yo-yo-dom to Oedipa’s Tupperware party and Tyrone Slothrop’s feckless zonal pursuit of alcohol, drugs and sexual conquests. Their rebellions against the historical mythos of capitalism are comically flawed, but nevertheless operate as exempla for the reader. The only way to understand (or at least to enjoy) these novels is to suspend one’s belief in the consistency of accepted cultural logic and unleash the paranoid sublime within. Pynchon succeeds in making this an educational process through the dense network of literary, scientific and cultural references that have inspired so many scholars, fans and casual readers. He succeeds in making it fun through his keen sense of irony, the comic absurd and parody. Most
importantly, he makes it a boundless process, a zone of unlimited potential, which helps energize both scholars and more casual readers to return to his books and construct cultural monuments to them, from companion guides and Pynchon Notes to illustrative art and wikis. These groups maintain and expand the literary networks built around Pynchon’s books, creating imagined communities that take the literary references and recommendation webs of book sites and advance the process to an entirely new level. The playful explorations of Pynchon’s work among communities like the Pynchon-L list seem as prolific as the work of what is sometimes referred to in academic circles now as the “Pynchon industry” of professional scholarship.

Before considering new communities beyond the academy, it is worth pausing to consider the “Pynchon industry” as a cultural phenomenon in its own right (Figure 7). The pace of that scholarship continues unabated since Pynchon first “arrived” on the academic scene with the founding of Pynchon Notes in 1979. It is interesting to note the cyclical nature of publications since that point, with major spikes frequently occurring approximately six years after the appearance of a new novel. The spikes and valleys can be explained partially by the time it has taken successive waves of scholars encountering Pynchon’s latest work to incorporate it into dissertations, articles, and books, particularly in light of the long gaps between novels. The publication of Mason & Dixon in 1997 had an immediate effect on the publishing world, but it took until 2003 for the huge increase in Pynchon citations to appear. Just as interesting is the remarkably sustained power Gravity’s Rainbow has had as a field of critical study and its centrality in launching the “industry” in the 1970s and 1980s. This is surely a credit to the book as a literary work, but it also suggests certain
pragmatic responses among academics: nobody wants to spend years researching an author who turns out to be a one-hit wonder, a flash in the critical pan.

By the mid-1970s, Pynchon scholars had *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* to build on—a solid foundation for a career of critical work. 2008 was his best all-around year, netting him 76 additions to the Pynchon Industry Bibliography, but this figure included only 4 dissertations. One might argue that Pynchon’s best year was actually 1978, when ten out of 22 entries were dissertations. The graph above, in other words, is also a representation of the growing critical monument to Pynchon’s oeuvre—not just an annual production but an expanding intellectual framework of referenced research, distinct schools of thought and expanding international reach. While the spikes in this network continue to grow, it remains to be seen whether scholarly discourse about Pynchon will continue to grow and whether the author will continue to produce new fuel for the fire.
As we consider the MLA data alongside email traffic from the group Pynchon-L, the patterns of two distinct intellectual exchange networks become clear. Pynchon-L activity spiked in 1997, with the publication of *Mason & Dixon*; in 2003, the year he appeared on *The Simpsons* and wrote a forward to a new edition of *1984*; and 2006, when *Against Day* appeared amidst much discussion of an Amazon synopsis seemingly composed by Pynchon himself. The only time academic interest and popular conversation peaked together, the effect seems to have been driven by the same delayed reaction to *Mason & Dixon* discussed earlier. Adding in the annual accumulation of Amazon reviews, we can see that this third group operates with some
consistency on a cycle that crests between the immediate response of the Pynchon-L list and the delayed contributions of scholars. Since Amazon began selling books in 1996, a major wave of reviews appeared (no doubt driven largely by *Mason & Dixon*). Activity only rose in 2007 in the aftermath of *Against the Day*. Pynchon fans on Pynchon-L discussed the new novel long before its release, but the Amazon community only began to take interest following its publication and, one assumes, their experiences of actually reading it.

![The visual comparison of these long-running, massively parallel intellectual conversations is, needless to say, misleading in several respects. The typical MLA contribution runs to thousands of words, whereas the typical Pynchon-L email is a few](image)

Figure 8: MLA Bibliography, Pynchon-L and Amazon Reviews, 1992-2011

The visual comparison of these long-running, massively parallel intellectual conversations is, needless to say, misleading in several respects. The typical MLA contribution runs to thousands of words, whereas the typical Pynchon-L email is a few
The conversational genre of the P-list in many ways resembles a casual reading discussion amongst undergraduates—participants bring up references and offer interpretations to the group—while academic work tends to address Pynchon on much higher theoretical levels. Consider this post from April 15, 2011:

Because of the way my computer is set up I can't conveniently provide a link, but the NY Times today has an interesting Pynchon mention.

Review of Wallace’s The Pale King.

Compares it with GR.

The way historic periods are projected into the present.

In Wallace's case the 80s into the present.

With GR it was the 40s into the 70s. (Mackin)

In subsequent posts, other participants provided the missing link, discussed the author of the Times review, novelist Tom McCarthy and some brief comments about Wallace as a writer before the thread fizzled out. At the same time, however, participants were conducting a collaborative reading group for Gaddis’s The Recognitions, and the scope of conversation on Pynchon-L can vary widely.

By contrast, Amazon reviews operate in a unique, hybrid zone that blends high and low cultural references, personal experience and critical distance, at some times adopting the mantle of objective journalism and at others dabbling in pastiche, satire and Pynchonesque literary evocation. While it is less critically focused than either of the other conversations, it is also the most explicitly oriented to the creation and
expansion of literary networks and the sharing of books. One review of The Crying of Lot 49 neatly draws many of the distinctions I have been arguing for here:

While I consider this to be one of the most amazing texts ever written, it also suffers greatly from being taught badly by misguided college instructors and from being misrepresented by others whose exposure to it was under less-than-ideal conditions. To wit: I have used this text in a freshman composition classroom, and by and large these students have enjoyed it, found it both interesting and challenging, and above all something worth discussing. In contrast, nearly every graduate student I know who was "taught" the book in a graduate course unequivocally hates it (or, worse yet, smugly thinks that it can be summed up as an exercise in violating reader expectations). In the wrong academic context, Lot 49 can be an awful experience; however, if read outside such a context, or in some other open frame of reference, it can be a truly incredible and rewarding read. I find that every time I read it, every time I use it in a classroom, something unexpected develops out of that experience, very often, in the latter case, as a result of student insight and discussion. (And, if you have nothing to do with academics, by all means, read Lot 49, and forget (at least for now) that it has ever been the subject of academic discussion!). (“An Incredible Book”)

Here the anonymous reviewer argues for three distinct levels of reader appreciation, two of them positive. Pynchon can be enjoyed by those who “have nothing to do with academics,” and it can also be appreciated by undergraduates in writing classes. It is
precisely at the intersection of this writer’s experience and the Pynchon industry—the formative seminars where graduate students in literary study settle on their areas of concentration—that Pynchon can go wrong. In this “wrong academic context” the work is either a punishment or simply an “exercise” with no benefit for the academic reader. Like so many Amazon reviewers, this writer operates in the presence of the academy but draws a clear distinction from the direct and heavy-handed pedagogy that can be imposed in the classroom. *Lot 49* can be “incredible and rewarding” to read, but only if the reader can unlock its intellectual treasures for herself.

What draws these different engagements together in Figure 8 is the way they can visually represent the cultural transactions that make up Pynchon’s lasting appeal. The distinct networks created by his readers and interpreters do overlap, as when Pynchon scholars read or post on Pynchon-L, everyday readers create links to academic texts, or when Pynchon directly brings popular and high culture into tension in his writing (or on *The Simpsons*). These different networks of exchange point out once more how significant cultural consumption can be as its own, very rich form of cultural production.

They also demonstrate three different readerships constructing three different kinds of cultural temporality. The academic books and papers adopt the implicit rhetoric of the longue durée, the enlightened progress of knowledge and the commensurability of research and facts. Amazon encourages its customers to adopt a timeless sense of reading pleasure, one founded not on the futural telos of endless progress but on the edenic consumer present, the endless now of cultural shopping. Consumers make that timeless present their own by accumulating a different kind of
critical monument in their reviews, one that builds on the eternal present of Amazon but incorporates all sorts of new literary networks, ranging from other cultural products to personal narratives and conspiracy theories. Finally, the Pynchon-L list users echo the detail-oriented focus and subject specificity of academic writers (through subject-heading threads in their messages, references to and quotations of previous posts and frequent reference to external links, documents and other kinds of evidentiary support for their claims), but at the same time operate on a much more abbreviated and rapidly shifting time frame. The structure of the mailing list, with its email-based delivery mechanism, means new posts flood in on a daily basis, pushing older entries into obsolescence. While the entire archive is searchable via a website, most users seem to live very much in the “now” of the list, which generally extends only to active threads, a window of a few days at most. In each of the three cases, then, cultural production takes on its own particular sense of time, a mutually understood dimensional bounding that determines how cultural products are appreciated and evaluated by the reading community in question.

**Changing the Reading Game**

From the glimpses of literary networks offered here, we can begin to make some claims about Pynchon’s work and about reading in the digital era. Perhaps the most surprising and reassuring datum is that Pynchon, with his paranoid style, fragmented narratives and obscure scientific jokes, is read by thousands of people, not all of whom are following a syllabus. The literary networks mapped above
demonstrate intense interest in popular as well as highbrow cultural history and indicate unequivocally that Pynchon’s work continues to foster new links and ideas for readers, from graphic novels to Dr. Seuss.

It is far more challenging, I think, to characterize contemporary shifts in reading practice, particularly with these modest case studies of a revolution that is still fully underway. In theoretical terms, we can position these findings alongside established arguments about distinction by considering the thought experiment posed on the last page of Cultural Capital. There Guillory calls for a Marxian universalization of access to “restricted” cultural production and suggests that this is the work of intellectuals: “socializing the means of production and consumption would be the means of an aestheticism unbound” (Guillory, Cultural Capital 340). While contemporary collaborative forms of production do not fulfill this utopian ideal, they have admitted millions of new players into what Guillory calls the “aesthetic game” of cultural evaluation. Sometimes the players make their own rules: choosing to review anonymously and eschew sociocultural integration, for example, or disrupting textual spaces with irrelevance, profanity and other forms of protest. Nevertheless, they are all participating, sharing thoughts and evaluations in a radically expanded field of literary practice. These networks do not reveal a disavowal of capitalism but rather a system that exists alongside it, sharing and at times exploiting the cultural goods that money cannot adequately value.

“Shakespeare wrote for money”—commerce will never be sundered from the field of literary production. However, some elements of consumer production undermine the corporate economy that has assiduously cultivated many of its
expressions. The material fact of the book can on occasion recede behind the community surrounding it, especially now, when the material fact of the contemporary book grows increasingly complex and ethereal. The heightened attention to the possibility of connection that Pynchon’s novels explore with such intensive grace has evolved into an expectation that more or less everything already is connected online. The paranoid sublime of characters like Oedipa Maas and the fugitive Rocketman are cultural archetypes played out daily in the landscapes of contemporary culture. Contributions from the formerly silent reader threaten to redefine the entire process of literature as a social endeavor, changing publication into a kind of cultural ground-breaking instead of the presentation a completed edifice. Pynchon arrived as a chronicler of the counterculture and a cultural gadfly, but refused to enter the limelight of history directly. Now the paranoid hyper-connectivity that he celebrated and parodied has become a universal and therefore unremarkable fact.

At the same time, while the images I have presented here explore the collective production of everyday readers, they barely scratch the surface of individual reading experiences. The same databases that collect millions of reviews over time also catalog our individual choices, providing shopping suggestions and reminding us of items we browsed in the past. These systems act like an intellectual support structure, ensuring that we are always connected to our previous cultural pathways, that our actions today will be added to permanent studies of our cultural habits and predilections. These profiles, lists and user histories might be described as a kind of closely groomed corporate habitus or personal style, maintained by software agents for our next visit. Amazon, Google, and other “Web 2.0” companies have succeeded
in harnessing what Michel de Certeau calls “reading as poaching” into a new cultural commodity (de Certeau 165-176). Every user action is another opportunity not for rebellion but for further integration into the system of cultural exchange.

Troubling as such a description is, these systems are little more than extensions and recorders of the ambitious cultural traversals we perform every day, a magnification of the syncretic powers of the brain, and while the means are disquieting, the ends can be inspiring. Millions of readers have new kinds of voice now, and there are real communities of thought and cultural production that owe their existence to networks like Amazon. This is where I believe the fundamental shift is taking place: our latent assumptions about reading are changing. Thanks in part to the reflexive literary paranoia of Thomas Pynchon, we now expect literature to be a complicated, polyvocal, multiple-register affair. We expect to find reviews and social communities of fans aficionados addressing new and sometimes obscure cultural commodities. We expect to grapple with a clamor of opinion instead of a carefully groomed, generally positive review. More than ever before, we are reading beyond the page, proceeding in the knowledge that a thousand contexts contend for our attention, and that any word or phrase might lead to a new, far-flung conversation.

The flowering of reading as community practice online also instills a certain ethical grounding to literary consumption. In Bourdieu’s terms, websites like Amazon authorize all of us to become interpreters and offer readings of texts, granting the community democratic powers to rate these readings, for better and for worse. The

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27 I use the term in the sense of Albert Hirschman’s Exit, Voice and Loyalty.
28 See Guillory on the ethics of reading (“The Ethical Practice of Modernity: The Example of Reading”).
dual function of collaborative reading is both to inform our individual choices and to make us charter members in new intellectual communities, should we choose to participate. As we continue to influence and be influenced online, the literary networks themselves become far more worthwhile than any individual node. Reviewing, cataloging, tagging and archiving can become cultures unto themselves, gradually transforming individual productions into accumulations, bibliographies and textual monuments in their own right.

At the heart of these new literary modes is the emergence of consumer constructions of temporality. These new perspectives side-step the business calendars of literary consumption: the implicit appeals and challenges of publication schedules, marketing campaigns, commercial book clubs and best-seller lists encouraging us to buy the latest cultural product before it has lost its auratic novelty. All of these temporal frames are still in place, of course, encouraging us to spend and think in particular ways, but the reader now has a much more active role in setting the terms of the conversation. The accretive nature of the web makes the process of literary discovery fresh whether the book in question was reviewed last week or last century, and it is far easier to generate the communities of readership, of discernment, of protest online that top-ten lists and weekly reviews implicitly promise. By allowing this kind of immediate connection for almost any book (or, increasingly, almost any cultural product) instead of only for the small handful being commercially promoted, the Internet allows us to define new personal chronologies and experience any text as a fresh, living document populated not only with ideas but with other people, other readers.
The consumer’s production of time is, in all of these cases, a force of renewal on the one hand (for Pynchon’s ideas and literary work) and arrest on the other (for the forces of market entropy, obsolescence and waste that would have us discard these books, these thoughts, for new ones). The reconfiguration of consumer production brings us to see the world in a different, more contingent way, and to recognize that the powers Pynchon wields to elevate ephemera or destroy sacraments are ours to use as well. If we accept Ricoeur’s argument that time is a narrative construct, it becomes clear that collaborative reading forces us to confront and mediate conflicting temporal stories, leading us to constantly redefine attention, value, and what our time is ‘worth’ spending on. As cognitive scientists continue to demonstrate, our ability to think through and empathize with external situations and experiences makes up a vital part of our social selves. We should not be surprised that literature—the art of sharing the consciousness of others—is particularly affected by our new powers to reclaim and recast the experience of time. As Adam Smith argued in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, our sense of ethics is founded on our ability to imagine the experience of others. With these new means for thinking through and judging literature, we can access broad communities, leading, perhaps, to richer conceptions of human experience and understanding.

Ultimately our occasionally Orwellian systems of digital consumption and production have a generative, constructive impact. They can inspire positive cultural networks, bringing readers together even as we are driven to question assumptions and reconsider our relationships to capitalism and the consumer clocks of the workweek.
and the market. As one anonymous reviewer describes *Gravity’s Rainbow* on Amazon:

Yeah, it’s hard. But imagine for a second that you’ve been walking around all your life with a blindfold on, and one day you start picking at the fabric on your face, and you say, ‘Hey, wait a minute.’ And then you unwind the blindfold and see for the first time. You can feel impulses running down every axon and dendrite and making a thousand brand new neural connections a millisecond. Every second you’re getting smarter and smarter as you actually grow a bigger *brain*.

Well, this book is like that. (‘Easy to See Why Pynchon Inspires Slavish Adoration’)

We can reconfigure the inherent gulf of consumer culture with our own sense of time, and therefore of purpose, which leads ultimately to new conceptions of worth and self-worth distinct from marketing and financial exchange. The great beauty of such an immensely connected, richly conspiratorial universe is the opportunity each of us has to change it, to transmit our own thoughts as well as receive the dreams and directives of acquisitive paranoia. The era of diverse, collaborative literary networks is before us: an exciting, noisy world filled with individual production and the emancipation of shared, communicative imagination.
Chapter 2
Toni Morrison’s Talking Books

More than any other author considered in this project, Toni Morrison serves to define contemporary canonical literature. The sole living American to have won the Nobel Prize in literature, she has moved from first novelist (at the late age of 39) to grand dame of American letters in a few short decades. Beyond her fame, Morrison makes an excellent case study because of her own efforts to engage directly with her readers, as she has demonstrated through her repeated appearances on Oprah’s Book Club, among many other things. Morrison explained her philosophy clearly while discussing *Paradise* on the show:

> Novels are for talking about and quarrelling about and engaging in some powerful way. However that happens, at a reading group, a study group, a classroom or just some friends getting together, it’s a delightful, desirable thing to do. And I think it helps. Reading is solitary, but that’s not its only life. It should have a talking life, a discourse that follows. (Farr 1)

The talking life of books is a powerful metaphor for the kinds of literary interactions at the heart of my research: the ways in which readers talk about books and the ways in which books talk to one another.

To suggest this parallel between the social lives of books and the trope of the talking book is to invite one potential criticism of this project in general. How can the reader be sure, after all, that I am not writing my own story here and simply imposing
my interpretive framework on the data? After all, the same methodologies were linked to rather different arguments in the context of Thomas Pynchon. And, in fact, both Pynchon and Morrison appear in the other’s network of book recommendations, sharing access to the cultural high road of canonical contemporary authorship. Yet the very distinctions of their broader networks, of the texts their works engage with, offer us answers to this interpretive dilemma. The most important difference between the two authors is as obvious as it is profound: biography. Where Pynchon has spent decades carefully erasing signs of public presence, Morrison has embraced her role as a literary public intellectual, writing novels, getting other writers published, and sharing her positions and ambitions through critical essays and interviews. Where Pynchon’s novels erode individual autonomy and even basic characterization amid the onslaught of parodic history, each of Morrison’s books approaches a few characters in fundamentally biographical stories.

Ultimately, I believe both authors share a particular gift for bringing diverse groups into dialog through their fiction, but their tactics for accomplishing this and their strategic goals for doing so diverge dramatically. That both authors have achieved such success is due first of all to their unique literary talents, which have granted them unrivaled prestige in spite of their choices to move against the cultural grain. Pynchon rejected the easy sell of public authorship for a well-credentialed young, male, white literary phenomenon. Morrison almost single-handedly reignited the field of African American fiction in the 1980s (H. L. G. Gates 92-3) and then refused to be pigeon-holed as an ‘African American woman novelist’ or to limit her writing to the themes or style of a particular cultural position. Their shared taste for
iconoclasm must be inflected by their close ties to the publishing industry: Pynchon married his literary agent, and Morrison worked for many years as an editor. Situating them as inverse producers in the literary field, as Young does when he argues that “Morrison’s open desire for the market…stands in direct opposition to Pynchon’s carefully guarded seclusion” (J. Young 187), allows us to reflect on their literary networks as the similar products of radically different authorial strategies.

Morrison and Winfrey

By spending long years in the publishing industry and serving as an editor at Random House before becoming a novelist herself, Morrison has been uniquely positioned to see the boundaries of both the larger U.S. publishing field and of African American letters. In fact, as John Young has argued, Morrison has succeeded in transcending these distinct literary audiences through another unusual turn in her literary career: her partnership with Oprah Winfrey. Morrison’s multiple appearances on Oprah and the four novels chosen as Oprah’s Book Club selections (Song of Solomon, 1996; Paradise, 1998; The Bluest Eye, 2000; Sula, 2002) have played a major role in breaking down the final barriers between commercial and critical success, helping to fulfill Morrison’s own ambitions: “I would like my work to do two things: be as demanding and sophisticated as I want it to be, and at the same time be accessible in a sort of emotional way to lots of people, just like jazz” (Dreifus). Morrison’s gift is in creating works that not only speak in multiple registers, addressing both elite canons of literary taste and popular audiences, but in bringing
those groups together, combining those different registers, as it were, into a single conversation.

Morrison also performs the same unifying gesture in a different context through the medium of Oprah’s Book Club, where shots linking author interviews, readings and reader reactions can at times look like concert footage. As Young argues, “[b]y embracing ‘Oprah’s Book Club,’ Morrison replaces separate white and black readerships with a single, popular audience” (J. Young 181). In part because of her preexisting literary prestige and in part because of the Club’s incredible market power, Morrison is not bound by the dictates of the predominantly white publishing industry to produce African American fiction of a particular kind. In practical terms, her audience increased by orders of magnitude. It’s hard to overstate the show’s impact on American reading habits: in the club’s heyday from 1996-2002, at least one Oprah selection was on the *New York Times* bestseller list every single week (Farr 16). Yet Morrison’s books are not the easy reading that so often typifies such bestsellers, which must thrive in the harsh commercial environments of airport news-stands and retail shelves with rapid turnover. Instead, Morrison’s work combines the formal challenges of high modernist prose with universally approachable themes, encouraging readers to leap across the gaps of racial, gender and social distinction in exploring these literary networks. Perhaps more even than Morrison’s Nobel Prize, then, her partnership with Winfrey has brought highbrow literature to the popular playing field. The partnership has challenged often unstated divisions of literary class and created a mass-media consumer dialog for the social and political issues at the heart of Morrison’s works.
The Morrison-Winfrey collaboration is particularly interesting because both partners took significant risks in participating. As a rising talk-show star, Oprah wagered her commercial future when she began promoting not just reading but the old-fashioned idea of a book club to her viewers. The intensely unforgiving world of television ratings leaves little room for experimentation, and the book club perennially costs Oprah points in audience metrics (Farr 70). She could have hedged her bets by sticking to crowd-pleasing bestsellers, and she did promote more than a few, but she has also ended up putting a national spotlight on four of Morrison’s novels among several other “serious” works, like Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. All of this underscores the fact that the Book Club was not a primarily financial venture, as Cecilia Konchar Farr argues in *Reading Oprah*, but a kind of cultural mission. On several occasions, Oprah told Morrison on-air that “there would never have been a Book Club had there not been you as an author” (“Oprah’s Book Club; Look Back at Past Book Clubs and the Current One, ‘Sula’”). The risk, then, was an intellectual one before it became a publishing phenomenon or a cultural touchstone. Oprah gambled on televising the experience of literary community, and she started with her own intense relation to Morrison’s texts, an appreciation that led to the film *Beloved* as well as the Book Club itself.

For her part, Morrison also had something to lose by accepting Oprah’s invitation. When the club began in 1996, Morrison was a critically acclaimed author with respectable sales: to join a daytime television personality in hawking books could have been a major blow to her highbrow literary prestige. Morrison recalled her first interaction with the club, the selection of *Song of Solomon*, as a complete surprise:
“I’d never heard of such a thing […] and when someone called, all excited, with the news, all I could think was, ‘Who’s going to buy a book because of Oprah?’” (Gray). Her appearances on the show have consistently walked a fine line between the challenging nature of Morrison’s allusive, formally playful narratives and the easy presence of the author herself in the midst of the Book Club, acting once again as an interlocutor, this time between her work and her readers. Together, Morrison and Winfrey developed an ethos for the book club as it evolved from the spectacle of *Oprah*, reinforcing their own commitment to this path-breaking collaboration by encouraging readers to join them ‘outside the box’ of traditional television and highbrow literary culture.

One of the central metaphors both Morrison and Oprah have used to construct and describe the idea of the club is the value of literary labor. In a segment titled “Writers on Writing,” Morrison explained her art fundamentally as a laborer’s struggle:

> It's work. It's a small idea that becomes a bigger one, and then where is the language for it? It's one word at a time, one idea. It’s constant revision, trying to make it look inspired, trying to make it appear effortless, trying to make it appear comfortable and exciting and, at the same time, revelatory. And that, for me, is not a question of inspiration. It's a question of very, very hard, very sustained work. (“Writers on Writing; Best-selling Authors Discuss Some of the Tricks of Their Trade”)
Throughout their appearances together, Morrison and Oprah emphasized the importance of this applied effort in reading and literary comprehension as well. In an oft-repeated anecdote, Oprah once asked Morrison why her books are so challenging: “‘Do people tell you they have to keep going over the words sometimes?’ Morrison replies, ‘That, my dear, is called reading’” (Farr 13). Over the course of the book club Oprah has dealt a number of times with readers complaining about the challenging nature of Morrison’s novels (as well as some of her other selections). Throughout, Winfrey has tempered the rigor and intensity of the individual reading experience with the benefits of shared discussion and analysis, where readers (whether they are students, viewers or members of a local book club) can collaboratively work through the text. As Oprah put it in 2002, “Just read a book. You’ll become part of a worldwide community of all people reading the book at the same time. So much energy going into one place. Fantastic” (quoted in Farr 60). I suspect it was this enthusiasm, and this outlook, on Winfrey’s part that led Morrison to accept her first invitation and to return to the show numerous times over the coming years.

This collaboration, which began as a kind of intellectual adventure for both of its creators, has continued to draw both Winfrey and Morrison out of their comfort zones. One example of Morrison’s literary risk-taking for the sake of the Book Club has been her willingness to record abridged audio versions of her own works for the sake of those without the time to read them. This is striking not just for the abridgment but for the hours of time Morrison must have invested in reading and recording works in her own voice, thereby redefining the aesthetic integrity of her work in aid of reaching a larger audience (J. Young 199). As John Young argues, this is a new kind
of ‘talking book,’ and it is one created specifically for the mass-mediated and yet intimate dialogs that *Oprah* makes possible. The politics of this kind of conversational reading can be challenging, as when readers complain about the length and difficulty of the prose to Morrison or Winfrey directly. At times Winfrey seems almost fawning in her fulsome praise of Morrison, as in the *Sula* book club:

> But to reduce the words of Toni Morrison to simply story is an injustice. Her work is larger than life, bigger than the pages on which it’s written. It’s the type of writing that readers relish, critics applaud, words so perfectly formed, other writers weep. She has received nearly every writing award possible, culminating when the Nobel Prize award was bestowed in 1993. (‘Oprah’s Book Club; Look Back at Past Book Clubs and the Current One, ‘Sula’)

At the same time, of course, Winfrey controls every moment of the show, from timing and pre-filmed footage to choosing guests and questions. The challenge of maintaining a sense of conversational openness and fluidity is ultimately only possible through glimpses of other diegetic spaces: the book club dinners Winfrey organized for authors and readers at her house; local book clubs organized by readers; and various pre-recorded segments, author interviews and the like. In this way, Winfrey makes real the promise of the Book Club in general, that “what a good book does is open doors to other areas,” by exploiting the idioms and advantages of television (Farr 67). The rewards of this labor, the triumphs of literature, are apt to be spliced into future book club highlight reels and recaps, like a televised common-place book.
The Book Club is an intellectually delicate balance, promising readers a kind of enlightenment and cultural knowledge for their hard work, but ultimately dependent on the talk show. While Winfrey has been a pioneer in the field ever since she rose to prominence (and continues to be, with the end of *Oprah* and the launch of a new cable network channel in 2011), the Book Club exists within a platform fundamentally at odds with it. The daily talk show is a mass-media engine designed process celebrity, scandal and disagreement; it is much more challenging to adapt the slow-burning fuel of critical analysis and literary discussion to serve it, as Winfrey’s low Book Club ratings indicate. To bridge the gulf between Morrison’s highly credentialed, highbrow prose and an audience that (at least initially) generally read very little, the conversational mode of the Book Club is distinct from the kind of critical evaluations we will focus on later in this chapter. Where professional reviewers and Amazon customers often position Morrison’s books in a wider literary context, Oprah’s Book Club is much closer to the local book groups Janice Radway studied in *Reading the Romance*. Discussants on *Oprah* almost never bring up other texts or authors unless they are previous selections, instead describing texts in personal, emotive terms. For Oprah’s readers, reading is not primarily a way to increase cultural capital but to effect personal change.

This ‘self-help’ element of the Book Club links it to a long history of middlebrow self-advancement frowned upon by cultural elites, from Samuel Smiles’ *Self-Help* to Oprah’s eternal interest in dieting and tragedies overcome. While that stigma remains for some (such as Jonathan Franzen, who infamously declined Winfrey’s invitation to appear on the show), the Book Club’s market influence has
made it one of the most exciting events in publishing history of the past 15 years. Millions of people, primarily women, are reading challenging and innovative novels that previously, in the tacit languages of class and marketing, had been branded as beyond their reach. With its televised seminars, dinners and conversations, the Book Club has moved beyond the passive format of the entertainment talk show to model active literary behaviors for viewers, encouraging them to participate in online conversations and local discussion groups. In essence, Winfrey and Morrison pioneered a new kind of literary network that combined the emotional immediacy of television with the expansiveness of fiction. The Book Club harnessed the broadcast power of television not just to disseminate entertainment but to germinate a dormant form of the literary social. In doing so, Morrison and Winfrey reinvented the populist mode of literary conversation, the idea of millions of people reading and discussing the same novel together: “a discourse that follows”. As Morrison put it in the *Paradise* Book Club: “a discourse that follows” (Farr 1).

In the pages that follow there will be no direct analysis of Oprah’s Book Club—those transcripts and recordings that are available rarely move beyond the scope of the individual into the territory of literary comparison—but its power makes itself known everywhere. Thanks in part to *Oprah* Morrison’s works are, to her readers, not just ‘talking books’ but ‘thinking books’—texts that require reflection and intersubjective consideration to truly function as literature.
Books Talking: Morrison Review Networks

Scholars who explore crowd-generated data of the sort available on Amazon often fall into a binary response of delight or revulsion as they attempt to explain these new mechanisms of social and cultural interaction. Those enamored of “Web 2.0” invoke some version of Chris Anderson’s “long tail” argument that the vastly expanded cultural choices available online are driving an expansion and diversification of consumer interest, and that reduced the transaction costs of sharing this information are creating new possibilities for “collective action,” as Clay Shirky puts it (Shirky 21). The opposition is best exemplified by Andrew Keen, who bemoans our disintegration into a culture of atomized “amateurs.” Rather than taking sides in this debate, my approach here is to ask how new architectures of connection are changing existing models of cultural exchange—to ask, as it were, not whether online literary culture is better or worse than what we had before but rather how it works. To that goal, I am drawn to a particularly appropriate scholarly metaphor that shares a long history with Morrison’s critical reception: the trope of the talking book.

As Henry Louis Gates argued in his seminal text on Afro-American literary criticism, The Signifying Monkey: “Black people, the evidence suggests, had to represent themselves as ‘speaking subjects’ before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture” (129). The particular attention to “Negro expression,” to use Zora Neale Hurston’s term, is a hallmark of African American authorship that functions not only as a way of establishing distinct forms of cultural and racial identity but as a vital first step in breaking the shackles of silencing objectification imposed by slavery. To be a black writer, Gates argues,
requires more than mastering classical white forms of literary discourse; it demands innovation not just in content but in form. Morrison’s deep ties to this legacy of the talking book, expressed most famously by Hurston and Ishmael Reed, go beyond what Gates calls the way “black texts ‘talk’ to other black texts” to question, as Morrison did in her Nobel lecture, the stakes of literary conversation itself (xxvii; What Moves at the Margin 198-208).

In this light, the interactions traced out below are merely amplified and indexed versions of cultural exchanges that have gone on as long as people have written and shared books. In the network graphs that follow we can see the efficiency with which Morrison’s texts have been woven into many literary conversations, linking together historically and culturally diverse canons. These ‘talking books’ engage readers in many kinds of exchange, the most obvious of which is real consumption: Amazon’s “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought” recommendation feature. It is important to distinguish between the act of purchasing a book and the act of reading it; what we are considering here are networks of literary aspiration and desire, not necessarily reception as it is usually understood. It should come as no surprise that desire is fickle: these networks fluctuate through marketing campaigns, academic years, summer vacations, and other influences, all of which remain opaque behind the calculations of Amazon’s algorithms. The links between texts are therefore contingent, and to explore them using network analysis requires a clear definition of what each edge signifies. I mapped out the networks of texts linked through these user purchase decisions, starting with Morrison’s best-known novel, Beloved, and tracing the first ten books that are recommended from each product...
A link from 2666 to *The White Tiger*, for instance, indicates that shoppers on the 2666 page would see an image of *The White Tiger* underneath the “Customers Who Bought…” banner. Taken in aggregate, the recommendations are a mirror, a way to read Amazon’s best guesses about literary desire at a given point in time, and as they are also potentially subject to influence from marketing campaigns, movie tie-ins and the like, they operate in a feedback loop involving publishers and booksellers as well as consumers. The feedback is clearly imperfect and contingent, but we can take Amazon’s success as the world’s largest bookseller to indicate that their algorithms work, that they are reasonably efficient at discerning and satisfying readers’ consumer desires.

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29 The data discussed in this paper was collected May – August, 2010, using a script to emulate an anonymous browser on Amazon’s U.S. book site, as described in the introduction. Nodes in the images that follow have been colored according to the number of customer reviews each text has received (one rough measure of popular canonicity), with darker shading indicating more reviews. The number of reviews is also included in parentheses in the label of each node.
Beloved, arguably Morrison’s most famous work, points readers toward three books by authors other than Morrison herself: Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, a Cliffs Notes guide to Beloved and Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony (Figure 9). In other words, Ellison and Silko are the basic cultural points along which Amazon’s shopping carts are triangulating Morrison. Paired with Beloved, Ellison’s seminal text establishes a clear link between the two authors as pillars of the African American literary canon, and few readers or scholars would be surprised that the literary marketplace has made this connection. Yet if we accept these recommendations as fair evidence of Amazon customer shopping practices, as an inscription of literary consumption, the strong affiliation of Morrison and Silko suggests that other cultural force lines are equally important. Both novelists address some of the darkest moments
in American history, exploring victimization and narrative’s powers to rebalance the cultural record and “rememory” events that many would prefer be forgotten.

Figure 10: Amazon recommendations from *Ceremony*

Tracing these initial links reveals new subnets with their own complex prestige structures. *Ceremony* turns into a portal for Native American fiction that is entirely distinct from the rest of Morrison’s literary universe (Figure 10). At this point we can begin to see patterns that bear out John Guillory’s classic argument that “judgments with canonical force are institutionally located,” and that the most significant of these sites are schools (*Cultural Capital* 29). The ghosts of countless syllabi haunt this network, most notably in the way that genre distinctions (which are more closely tied
to the marketplace) are overruled when sufficiently prestigious texts “rise above” the local canon to become affiliated with other “masterpieces” in the broad super-canon of literary greatness.\textsuperscript{30} Likewise, other grouping influences can overcome authorial boundaries: Bolaño’s 2666 connects to this network via \textit{A Mercy}, which weaves Morrison’s work into a collection of other contemporary novels (Figure 11).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure11.png}
\caption{Amazon recommendations from \textit{A Mercy}}
\end{figure}

The interconnections between these wide-ranging texts—\textit{Netherland}, \textit{Unaccustomed Earth} and \textit{The White Tiger}, in addition to Bolaño—suggest both the power of temporality and ‘newness’ as an organizing category and the shift in \textit{A Mercy} to the subject of coloniality. With her latest book, Morrison builds a new avenue for her work, linking it to the burgeoning field of postcolonial literature and thereby recontextualizing her role as an American writer. Amazon readers have associated

\textsuperscript{30} Cf. Guillory on the pedagogic imaginary, (\textit{Cultural Capital} 28-38) I discuss this term in more detail below.
and *A Mercy* in both directions, suggesting that a state of fluid transfer exists between these two cultural zones. This is a dramatic difference from the unidirectional link from *Beloved* to *Ceremony*, marking a distinction between readers who buy both Morrison and Silko (many of them students, no doubt—more on that below) and those readers who purchase Silko alone, or purely within a Native American literary canon. The difference suggests an imbalance of power: if we imagine these arrows as one-lane roads on which readers can travel, this link might ferry them away from Morrison into many happy years of traveling among Native American fiction.

**Super-Canons, Weak Ties and Prestige**

One of the most elusive but also most fascinating phenomena visible in these literary networks is the presence of a super-canon of classic American literature. These are texts familiar to every high school graduate, works like *The Great Gatsby* and *As I Lay Dying*, that have become deeply entrenched in the fabric of American literary life—sometimes deeply entrenched that we may rarely think of them after moving on to adulthood. Yet these works play an important function in the networks of recommendations I have been exploring, acting as hubs between clusters of texts organized by genre, authorship or other considerations. Texts like these appear throughout all of the recommendation networks I have explored in this project, usually just a link or two away from the primary object of study.
Figure 12: Invisible Man as a Super-Canonical Hub
Based on my observations throughout this project, and in the context of Morrison in particular, I believe that one significant measure of a contemporary author's canonical status is the extent to which her work functions as a hub between disparate genres and the established canonical order. Another way to think about the significance of hubs is to consider their role as “weak ties” between tightly clustered groups, offering less-traveled but crucial avenues for affiliation beyond the scope of normal and established cultural structures. As Mark Granovetter noted when he first proposed the importance of weak ties in 1973, these ties between major groups often escape notice precisely because they fall in a gap between the small-scale (i.e. the first- and second-order networks I have explored here) and the macro-scale of networks in aggregate (1360). Consequently, they are also difficult to visualize effectively, so I have chosen to explore the American super-canon here through a single example, *Invisible Man* (Figure 12; limited to two levels of depth from IM). (Note: for the sake of visual clarity I have deleted the many Cliffs Notes editions that appear around this network like remoras around sharks).

The function that *Invisible Man* serves here is to bridge several different relatively distinct literary spaces. Morrison, on the right, largely connects to her own authorial network here—the visible link to *Ceremony* spirals off, as we know, into an extensive galaxy of Native American fiction, but here we can see Morrison merely as one element of a complex canonical framework held together by Ralph Ellison’s novel. This is, in part, an African American network: *Invisible Man* links to *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, which in turn leads readers to a selection of other James Baldwin works. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* takes readers to Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, though it
also makes the unusual leap to Ted Hughes’s translation of Euripides and to *The Great Gatsby*. Indeed if the bottom half of the diagram is dominated by African American literature, the top half dramatically bears out Toni Morrison’s argument in *Playing in the Dark* that American literature is deeply entwined with its African American influences. Here, *Invisible Man* acts as a hub for what we might think of as the main seam of American literary prestige: Fitzgerald and Faulkner, whom in turn lead readers to J. D. Salinger, Arthur Miller, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. The subnet surrounding *The Great Gatsby* is particularly striking since it encompasses drama and fiction from a set of authors with radically different styles and period distinctions. What holds them together is the canon: high school and college syllabi.

The power of this super-canon of American masterpieces can be demonstrated by the fact that Ellison’s novel is actually a member of this genre-breaking, historically diverse canon. Not merely a hub that points readers into a network with which it shares only a weak tie, Ellison’s text is well-integrated into the super-canon, and this cluster is itself quite interconnected. If we were to remove *Invisible Man* from the center of the diagram, Hurston, Fitzgerald and Faulkner would still be linked together, with a single recommendation from *As I Lay Dying* maintaining a connection to Morrison. In this sense, *Invisible Man* is technically not a hub, though it serves an important linking function between the Morrison cluster and the rest of the super-canon. But its central position here in elevating Morrison to a wider frame of American literary fame is exemplary of a pattern repeated throughout these recommendations as readers establish patterns of distinction between and among
major and minor authors. At larger scales of this network, Morrison’s work forms a tightly interconnected subgroup within a tangle of high canonical texts, extending the American classics in Figure 12 to writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne and defining a more international kind of classic author that includes Fyodor Dostoevsky, James Joyce and William Shakespeare.

We can get a clearer sense of this larger American canon and the forces driving it by ranking texts based on the number of incoming connections they receive in the network, which is a basic definition of “prestige” in social network analysis (Table 4).\(^{31}\) To put these figures in perspective, the average node in the network received only 5.2 links, and genre affiliation plays a major role in prestige. *Tracks*, for example, received all of its endorsements from other Native American books, while *The Great Gatsby* was part of a network of American classics including Faulkner, Ellison, Hawthorne, Steinbeck and Hurston.

**Table 4: Prestige rankings from Beloved Amazon network (3 levels)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Links</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Tracks</em></td>
<td>Louise Erdrich</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>The Great Gatsby</em></td>
<td>F. Scott Fitzgerald</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>Ceremony</em></td>
<td>Leslie Marmon Silko</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (Cliffs Notes)</em></td>
<td>Cliffs Notes</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Their Eyes Were Watching God</em></td>
<td>Zora Neale Hurston</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Song of Solomon</em></td>
<td>Toni Morrison</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Mark Twain</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter (Cliffs Notes)</em></td>
<td>Cliffs Notes</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>The Bluest Eye</em></td>
<td>Toni Morrison</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Invisible Man</em></td>
<td>Ralph Ellison</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>Beloved</em></td>
<td>Toni Morrison</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>Jazz</em></td>
<td>Toni Morrison</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>Fools Crow</em></td>
<td>James Welch</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Cliffs Notes)</em></td>
<td>Cliffs Notes</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>To Kill a Mockingbird (Cliffs Notes)</em></td>
<td>Cliffs Notes</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{31}\) For one basic definition of the term and some applications, see Wasserman and Faust (174-5).
As one moves farther down the rankings, Amazon prestige inflects this mass canonicity in some surprising ways. The established white canon survives in the form of Fitzgerald, Twain and attendant Cliffs Notes, while newer Native American and African American classics round out the list. These chart-toppers reflect the enduring power of canonical tenure in American literature in the Guillory sense, epitomized here by Fitzgerald’s and Twain’s now-ubiquitous novels, as well as the gradual shift in classroom syllabi to expand the Great American Reading List. The prestige on display here mirrors a particular kind of academic prestige, the widely acknowledged canon of high school reading lists and major anthologies, and this list is precisely the point at which these academic institutions interface with the market.\(^{33}\) *Invisible Man’s* significance as a bridge between different clusters in the graph is not wholly evident here, since its weak ties do not include a set of strong ties to other Ellison fiction or a strong genre affiliation. By contrast Louise Erdrich has an extensive collection of her

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32 Amazon typically combines different editions of a single book and recommends only one, but in this instance a different spelling of the author’s last name has created two competing entries for *Crime and Punishment*.

33 To be sure, another kind of academic prestige involves obscure authors and little-known texts, but if the academics who champion them are successful, the outcome is the same, with prestige in the marketplace.
own novels mutually reinforcing one another as well as tighter connections to the Native American literary cluster.

Indeed, the speed with which Erdrich, Silko and Morrison have achieved their canonical status is, in literary-historical terms, breathtaking: *Ceremony* and *Song of Solomon* were both published in 1977, and *Tracks* in 1988, meaning that in just a few decades these books have risen to the top at America’s largest bookstore, suggesting their centrality in the wider field of popular literature. We know this anecdotally, from high school and college syllabi, from survey classes and exam reading lists, but this data from Amazon confirms their material presence at the heart of the literary marketplace, as icons that are heavily invested in by readers. A look at the table as a whole corroborates the ghostly presence of thousands of school assignments in shaping these networks of purchases (an effect we will return to in discussing reader reviews of Morrison’s work). The presence of Cliffs Notes texts in these prestige rankings underscores the point that students obviously drive a huge percentage of these purchase decisions, and they are driven in turn by the teachers, school boards and academic critics who set syllabi.

**Cliques and Cliffs Notes**

The strong presence of Cliffs Notes in the Amazon network marks one of the many subnets or minor genres present and at times almost invisible within the larger space of Morrison’s literary network. The degree to which Cliffs Notes mutually reinforce ties among themselves through consumer purchases suggests another metric
for measuring lines of force and influence in these recommendations: the clique. Adapted once again from social network theory, the clique is a term used to define a “complete” subgroup where all members are directly connected to all other members. Morrison’s networks are full of small cliques—clusters of three or four texts that are completely interconnected—but when we look only at the largest cliques present, striking patterns emerge. In Table 5 I have charted out the largest cliques to be found within three links of Beloved. The graph includes all cliques containing at least six nodes (in technical terms, a clique of k=6), and they reveal a very different canonical function from the ‘Great American Reading List’ we explored in Table 4. When we privilege groups over individual ‘all-star texts’, we get a see a very different kind of prestige at work in the contemporary literary marketplace.

The Native American canon we identified earlier unfurling from Ceremony exists here as well, but in a cluster of texts written exclusively by Louise Erdrich. Morrison’s works also inhabit their own clique, as do William Faulkner and Roberto Bolaño’s, confirming in all three cases that authorship is a powerful dimension of literary consumption. More interesting, however, is the question of why Morrison, Faulkner, Erdrich and Bolaño are authors whose works clump together by name more consistently than any other writers in this network. I posit an answer in several pieces: first, not many authors have a minimum of six books in this elite network of recommendations surrounding Beloved, and their texts do not link closely enough with any other cluster to create a k=6 clique. Second, and more excitingly, these authors demonstrate something sufficiently distinctive and compelling in their writing that

34 (Stanley Wasserman and Faust 254-62). For a more detailed discussion of cliques, see the Introduction.
causes their works to be tightly affiliated. Simply put, readers purchase more than one of their books, and all of the texts visible in Table 5 lead consistently to the others. This is a sign both of some authorial uniqueness and of marketable literary consistency: it also is the commercial triumph of an authorial brand. To quote John Cheever again, “I’m a brand name like corn flakes, or shredded wheat” (Moran 25). In different ways Faulkner, Erdrich and Bolaño also share the role of interlocutor with Morrison, relating narratives from a distinct culture to the larger American mainstream.

I take this as an instance where the market asserts itself, treating authors more like brands than teaching tools. Personal and anecdotal experience suggests that the single-author syllabus is a rarity in contemporary American education, particularly in the high school and lower-level university courses most like to drive large numbers of book sales. The prestige listings in Table 4 strike me as much more familiar from course listings and summer reading assignments than the clusters in Table 5, which mark instead, I argue, the sustained impact of other forces: book clubs, particularly Oprah, and non-educational reading practices. Faulkner’s situation here is enlightening: as a writer whose influence on Morrison has long been a topic of critical discussion, some of the most interesting questions here relate to the significance of his work in the network as a whole. In terms of prestige, Faulkner scores surprisingly low, with *Absalom, Absalom!*, his most prestigious book, in a three-way tie for 24th place. The fact that Oprah picked three of his other novels for the Book Club in 2005 seems to have had little long-term impact on prestige, but might help explain why so many consumers have been investing repeatedly in the Faulkner clique. In short, Faulkner’s
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faulkner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Sound and the Fury</td>
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<td>The Hamlet</td>
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<td>Absalom, Absalom</td>
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<td>The Reivers</td>
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<td>Light in August</td>
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<td>Native American</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novels in Stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Name of the Rose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Elizabeth | Elizabeth |
|------------------|
| The granddaughter | The granddaughter |
| In the Blood | In the Blood |
| The Grandmother | The Grandmother |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>TCMN Native American</td>
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<tr>
<td>TCMN Native American</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5: Cliques from Related Amazon Network (k=6)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Faulkner</td>
</tr>
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<td>Native American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolano</td>
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<tr>
<td>TCMN Native American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faulkner</td>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolano</td>
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<tr>
<td>TCMN Native American</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
work presents a compelling example of divergence between the academic and commercial marketplace of literary prestige. As one rough measure, consider the inversion between Amazon “prestige” and the number of MLA Bibliography citations mentioning either author: 1,928 for Morrison; 3,877 for Faulkner. On Amazon, Faulkner is one of many authors filling in the corners between the big hits, with As I Lay Dying pointing towards Beloved, perhaps as a Book Club artifact, but receiving no reciprocal link in return. Even in the three-level Beloved network, the two authors are only connected indirectly, via Ralph Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston.

If these texts make up a supporting cast for the literary stars of the marketplace, there is another pervasive clique that fulfills a very similar function. The Cliffs Notes clique proves that readers become loyal to the brand, purchasing other editions consistently. The texts explicated by this sub-network of literary guidebooks are in many ways the clearest sighting yet of a difficult-to-define popular American literary canon. The Grapes of Wrath, The Scarlet Letter, The Catcher in the Rye: these are books millions of high school students read every year. Ironically, we glimpse this canon of American literature through a doubly normative filter, restricted first to the lucrative center of the study aid market (i.e. those racks of Cliffs Notes editions at bookstores clearly aiming for the most frequently assigned texts) and second to only the texts most frequently purchased together. This is a commercially and intellectually “safe” canon, the only non-white, non-male author present being Lorraine Hansberry.

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35 These results only include items published from 1980 - 2010, in an effort to control for the much longer period of time scholars have had access to Faulkner’s work. Using another metric (from 50 to 70 years after each author’s birth) provides similar ratios: 2,244 for Faulkner 1947 – 1977. 1,281 for Morrison for 1981 – 2001. Search conducted using EBSCO Host’s MLA International Bibliography database. For a discussion of this kind of analysis, see Matt Jockers’ online debate with Matthew Wilkins (Jockers).
writer of an earlier generation’s protest drama, *A Raisin in the Sun*. A work must be sufficiently culturally reputable for something so disreputable as a Cliffs Notes edition to be written for it, a fact that works in parallel with James English’s observations on the importance of scandal to literary prize systems. In many ways Cliffs Notes represents the pinnacle of a certain kind of literary consumption: the need to gain a basic kind of cultural capital as quickly and easily as possible in order to earn some credential such as passing a class, writing a paper or passing as a knowledgeable reader in conversation.

The only other non-authorial clique structure present in this network is the cluster of three overlapping groups revealed in Table 5. Louise Erdrich works as the intermediary between two sub-groups of Native American fiction. *Tracks* links to a set of more “prestigious” works that already appear in the upper rankings of our prestige table: widely recognized novels such as *Ceremony*, *Fools Crow* and *House Made of Dawn*. The other cluster, linked through *Four Souls*, reveals another intriguing second-order canon at work in Morrison’s network. In fact, with the exception of *Four Souls*, all the novels in this cluster achieve their limited prestige only by internal links to one another, creating a small, mutually informed structure with limited connections to the larger network. If Erdrich connects to a larger Native American canon via *Tracks*, here she also links to a more insular literary space made up exclusively of books by male Native American writers published in the last 15 years.

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36 English argues that scandal (for instance, the cozy relationships between judges and contestants and the public tantrums thrown by writers who don’t win) is not a distraction from literary prizes but actually central to their impact. Whatever tarnishing effect these events might have on prizes like the Man Booker, they make up for it in increased publicity, thus creating a cycle of growing prestige (203-16).
Table 6: Cliques from *Beloved* Amazon Network (k=5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roberto Bolaño</th>
<th>Toni Morrison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The Skating Rink | Beloved
| The Things They Carried | Love |
| Scarlet Letter (Audiobook) | What Moves at the Margin |
| The Hours I First Believed | The Bluest Eye |
| Their Eyes Were Watching God | Playing in the Dark |
| The Great Gatsby | Song of Solomon |
| The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn | Tar Baby |
| The Scarlet Letter | Conversations with Toni Morrison |
| Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (Audiobook) | Sula (Oprah's Book Club Hardcover) |
| The Crucible | Sula |
| The Things They Carried | |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canonical American Literature</th>
<th>Leadership, spirituality, adversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By Night in Chile</td>
<td>Fools Crow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazi Literature in the Americas</td>
<td>Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Savage Detectives: A Novel</td>
<td>My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and of Healing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Skating Rink</td>
<td>My Life with Martin Luther King Reflections on Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great Gatsby</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Their Eyes Were Watching God</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scarlet Letter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter (Audiobook)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Crucible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Things They Carried</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hour I First Believed</td>
<td>Tracks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn't Keep It to Myself</td>
<td>Tales of Burning Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'll Fly Away</td>
<td>Four Souls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Know This Much Is True</td>
<td>The Antelope Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She's Come Undone</td>
<td>The Bingo Palace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beowulf</td>
<td>The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>Love Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Lear</td>
<td>Indian Killer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Othello</td>
<td>Reservation Blues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hamlet</strong></td>
<td>Ten Little Indians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Toughest Indian in the World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Lone Ranger and Tonto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Fistfight in Heaven</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wally Lamb</th>
<th>Louise Erdrich</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Cliffs Notes #1</td>
<td>Fistfight in Heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beowulf</td>
<td>Indian Killer</td>
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<td><strong>Hamlet</strong></td>
<td>The Lone Ranger and Tonto</td>
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<td>Beowulf</td>
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<td>Macbeth</td>
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As I Lay Dying
Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby
Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
The Things They Carried
Their Eyes Were Watching God
Morrison's Beloved
The Invisible Man
Raisin in the Sun
Steinbeck's the Grapes of Wrath
The Catcher in the Rye
The Crucible
Williams' Glass Menagerie and Streetcar Named Desire

The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text
A Summer of Faulkner (Oprah's Book Club Box Set)
Absalom Collected Stories of William Faulkner
Go Down, Moses
Sanctuary: The Corrected Text
The Hamlet
The Portable Faulkner (Penguin Classics)
As I Lay Dying: The Corrected Text
Light in August

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven
Ceremony
The Way to Rainy Mountain
Wind from an Enemy Sky
Living Stories of the Cherokee Tracks

Ceremony
The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven
Tracks from Sand Creek
Four Souls
Grand Avenue: A Novel in Stories
The Hiawatha
From the Deep Woods to Civilization: Chapters in the Autobiography of an Indian Truth and Bright Water

Fools Crow
House Made of Dawn
The Way to Rainy Mountain
Nothing But the Truth: An Anthology of Native American Literature
Tracks
Winter in the Blood
Love Medicine

CliffsNotes #3

Faulkner

Marilynne Robinson
By loosening the definition of clique one more time, to $k=5$ connections, we unveil the further complexity of these clique interactions (Table 6). Out of fifteen cliques, six are connected to a Native American fiction structure (crossover texts marked in bold), while the Cliffs Notes groupings split off into three sub-sets. Marylinne Robinson makes an appearance in a single-author clique, as does Wally Lamb, joining Morrison, Bolaño and Faulkner as distinct islands of texts with strong inter-canonical bonds. Even these looser cliques generally operate according to the same rules of canonical structure, tying together books by authorship and, to a lesser extent, literary genre in consumers’ shopping decisions. The map of cliques at this level also lays out the major centers of gravitational influence, of prestige as defined by cohesive interior linking.

But of course, not all the cliques here follow these rules. Two in particular deserve our attention: one that I have labeled “Canonical American Literature” on the left and another that seems more thematically oriented, titled “Leadership, Spirituality, Adversity.” The latter includes *Fools Crow*, a Native American classic, as well as a memoir of childhood abuse, a memoir by Coretta Scott King, a book devoted to the ideal of “servant leadership” and Victor Frankl’s book of spiritual psychoanalytic philosophy. I was tempted to dismiss these results as a temporary echo of someone’s unusual syllabus assignments, but several of these texts were still associated together many months after the initial data was collected. But upon further research, this may be the result of a persistent echo: all five of these texts appear on the required reading list for a course in Gonzaga’s Masters in Organizational Leadership ORGL 532 (“Gonzaga Masters”). The school offers the program as an online Master’s Degree,
and this seems to be a clear link between the school and the marketplace. The second rule-breaking clique does not have a single “smoking gun” syllabus, but a Google search involving several of the titles will turn up many documents with a single theme: high school English reading lists. These are books assigned in AP English classes, discussed by students in college asking one another what they read in high school and mentioned by secondary school faculty reviewing the texts they choose to teach.

This expanded view of cliques in the Amazon network reveals several different layers or hierarchies of canonical taste working at the same time. At the high school and early college level, we have a battery of Cliffs Notes and the clique mentioned in the paragraph above. The single-author cliques extend from this zone (Morrison is now frequently assigned in high school, as is Faulkner) to somewhat less familiar writers like Marilynne Robinson, Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich and Roberto Bolaño. Meanwhile the presence of Wally Lamb clearly represents the power of Oprah and the adult reading culture of self-improvement. Finally the overlapping cliques of Native American fiction suggest that these cliques represent more complex forms of cultural ordering than a simple reading list. For this many texts to be associated this closely, a significant proportion of those who read Native American fiction must continue to do, constructing this elaborate network of emerging, ethnicity-based canonicity.

Like the recommendations graph, the book review, and the syllabus itself, the clique is a reductionist tactic, an attempt to explore the relationships between texts as they operate in groups. Amazon’s form of reductionism is more clearly tied to market signals—the way books are grouped in a bookstore and the way minority authors and
genre writers become lumped together. The complexity of these networks demonstrates both the chaotic range of cultural signals at war in the literary marketplace and the diversity of the reading choices people make. Perhaps the most striking discovery here is not that these landscapes of literary desire and acquisition are chaotic but that they are still governed by easily recognizable rules of attraction and connection. In the next section, we will explore how a different online reading community can operate with a very different set of these rules.

**Distinguishing Acquisition from Ownership: LibraryThing Networks**

The Amazon network explored above presents Morrison in diverse literary company, demonstrating the ease with which consumer desire transcends boundaries of both genre and distinction in its literary acquisitions. If Amazon allows us a peek into the aggregated shopping lists of readers, LibraryThing lets us study their bookshelves in a mode distanced from economic choice. The site bills itself as “a service to help people catalog their books easily,” with its social networking effects offered as an ancillary benefit to this central function. With something over a million members, the site is two or three orders of magnitude smaller than Amazon in terms of its customer base though since LibraryThing takes advantage of Amazon’s accessible product catalogs, they list comparable numbers of books.37 Because LibraryThing makes no overt effort to sell users books or to encourage literary commerce on the

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37 Amazon’s numbers presumably fluctuate, but a search in the fall of 2009 on their site turned up 7,331,101 results for new, printed books, and 19,181,329 results for printed books in all conditions. At that time LibraryThing claimed 5,327,655 unique titles cataloged, for a total of 51,282,649 volumes (“Advanced Search”; “Zeitgeist”).
site, it presents an atmosphere distinct from Amazon’s thoroughly commercial aesthetic in the same way that a community library differs from a bookstore. Ironically, this, too, is subtended by the literary behemoth; in 2008 Amazon acquired 40% of LibraryThing when it purchased Abebooks, a previous investor in the site. This contingency aside, LibraryThing presents a very different approach to literary networks, one predicated on the concept of the library and the ownership of books.

If this data initially seems identical to the shopping cart associations we explored earlier, the graphs below prove otherwise. As our Amazon networks demonstrated, books bought together can lead very different, and often transient, lives, whereas texts that enter a “library” assume an air of permanence and stable literary connections. Furthermore, by putting the onus on users to input and update information on their collections, LibraryThing creates a conscious and thoughtful process of literary selection; where Amazon’s passive tracking of consumer purchases represents one aspect of the literary consumer’s id, LibraryThing accesses the ego and superego through its appeals to the ordering and cataloging impulses of the collector. Based on the collections that users have added to the site, LibraryThing uses its own recommendation engines to derive suggested reading for each book in its database, a list of suggestions derived not from shopping carts but from bookshelves.³⁸

³⁸ This is really a simplification, since LibraryThing users employ the site however they choose, whether it be to list books as they read them (whether they own them or not), list books they hope to read in the future, or to take the site’s rhetoric at its word and share their “library.”
Figure 13: LibraryThing Recommendations from *Beloved* (1 Level)

A brief excursion through the parallel networks of LibraryThing books will allow us to better contextualize our conclusions from Amazon as well as to test our hypotheses about literary clique formation. The first level of *Beloved* connections on LibraryThing (Figure 13) already demonstrates the significant divergence of these two networks: Morrison links not so much to other Morrison here but to a network of recent and canonical African American writers. We could easily describe this list as a syllabus for a course in 20th century African American Literature, perhaps titled “Morrison: Inspirations and Influences” or even “The Black Bestseller.”
Figure 14: LibraryThing Recommendations from Beloved (Two Levels)
When we expand our perspective to a second order of distance (Figure 13), the LibraryThing network remains consistent linking Morrison to an extensive African American canon anchored in Morrison and Angelou. As with Amazon, however, Morrison’s work does offer a portal to the contemporary through Jones’s *The Known World*, which connects to a sub-net of novels with a character distinct from Amazon’s extreme contemporary (marked by the dotted square). Jones links not only to *The Stone Diaries*, published in 1993, but *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; its links to other recent texts are defined through its own contemporary, not the eternal present of Amazon’s marketing engine. Ann Patchett, Ha Jin, Carol Shields and the rest all published books a few years before *The Known World* came out in 2004, underscoring the accretive power of libraries and the distinctive time-capsule temporality they inspire, in stark contrast to Amazon’s eternal consumer present. Compare the rhetorical distance between, for example, the “New For You” section on Amazon’s homepage and the layout of LibraryThing’s “Your Books” page, which orders texts in the order that you added them to the site. Amazon continuously seeks to show you the books you might most want to buy, with a slant towards new releases and books that are in print; LibraryThing shows you books in the order you shared them, and by the logic of their collocation in libraries, with little regard for date of publication.

In the three level network (not shown) the differences from Amazon become truly remarkable. The most striking absence here is Native American fiction, which plays such a powerful role in the Morrison cosmology of Amazon’s networks of literary stardom. Beyond Denis Johnson’s recent *Tree of Smoke*, which finds its way into the expanded contemporary subnet visible in Figure 14, one is hard-pressed to
identify any prominent Native American writers at all. While I have no strong
evidence to support the claim, I would argue that this noticeable lack is a further
demonstration of the extent to which Amazon is dominated by school syllabi (which
would help explain Morrison’s affiliation with Native American fiction in the first
place) and LibraryThing is influenced by a much more Oprah-centric worldview, as
we will see below. On LibraryThing, Morrison’s work weaves itself into a rich and
wide-ranging set of African American texts that includes Malcolm X, Jean Toomer,
W. E. B. Du Bois and more before branching out to canonical 19th and 20th century
fiction, major non-fiction (Cornell West, Taylor Branch) and remote destinations such
as Ezra Pound and Sylvia Plath. Remote, that is to say, from the tightly commercial
expectations of Amazon, but less tenuous when we begin thinking of Morrison’s work
in its modernist academic and bibliographic contexts.

The wider we expand our perspective on Morrison’s LibraryThing network,
the more it comes to resemble an extended bibliography. Instead of a fairly distinct set
of overlapping syllabi and sub-canons, these texts are more deeply and
iconoclastically connected across the canonical boundaries that govern Amazon so
strongly. In numerical terms, the three-level Amazon network contains 243 nodes and
1260 links, for an average of 5.2 links per node; the LibraryThing network contains
only 192 nodes and 1037 links, averaging 5.4 links/node. This is striking because both
networks are mapped identically, using the top ten recommendations per book, so in
each case Beloved’s 3 level subnet could include a maximum of 1,110 books (if each
text was linked to only once, and we count Beloved separately). The smaller number
of nodes in the LibraryThing network indicates the more insular nature of that literary
landscape, where fewer books occupy the central core of space around *Beloved*.

LibraryThing recommendations range farther from the beaten path of classics and icons: instead of *The Scarlet Letter*, we have Cather and Dreiser, and in lieu of Cliffs Notes we have Cornel West and individually cataloged issues of *Folklore* magazine. If Amazon presents us with a small universe of easily recognizable, overlapping canons, the LibraryThing network is a little more idiosyncratic, populated by sub-clusters instead of a more broadly connected fabric of literary nodes. Our network statistics bear out this visual impression: at the k=5 level, 62.9% of the Amazon nodes were not part of any five-member cliques. However, only 49.5% of LibraryThing nodes were similarly disconnected, indicating a significant trend towards clique membership.

These abstract considerations of canonicity become much more interesting when we look at the specific nodes that are part of cliques in the LibraryThing network.

**Table 7: LibraryThing Cliques (k=8)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oprah's Book Club Selections</th>
<th>Their Eyes Were Watching God</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>A Map of The World</em></td>
<td><em>Tar Baby</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Songs In Ordinary Time</em></td>
<td><em>Beloved</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Book of Ruth</em></td>
<td><em>Invisible Man</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Black and Blue</em></td>
<td><em>Native Son</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Drowning Ruth</em></td>
<td><em>Jazz</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Midwives</em></td>
<td><em>Song of Solomon</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vinegar Hill</em></td>
<td><em>Sula</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>While I Was Gone</em></td>
<td><em>The Bluest Eye</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We Were The Mulvaneys</em></td>
<td><em>The Color Purple</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>House of Sand and Fog</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 7, the two largest cliques present in the LibraryThing network (at k=8 connections) bring together multiple authors in dramatically different canonical logics. The clique on the left would immediately be familiar to Oprah fans as a collection of Book Club selections. The clique on the right, while dominated by Morrison, is a more complex grouping that includes the canonical classics *The Color Purple, Invisible*
man, native son and their eyes were watching god at the core of Morrison’s literary network. This data offers a valuable counterbalance to our expectations of canon-formation on Amazon, where I for one presumed the commercial impact of Oprah’s advocacy would be most evident. In fact, syllabi and student assignments shape that network more strongly than Oprah’s recommendations, leading to literary structures with cliffs notes and extensive subnets of Native American fiction. Oprah’s Book Club finds its echo in LibraryThing instead, where “serious” readers compile and share libraries that might have taken years to collect.

This dramatic distinction lends itself to two areas of speculation. First, we might argue that the users on Amazon are younger and more inclined to do their (school) shopping online. The somewhat clunkier LibraryThing website emphasizes cataloging over design aesthetics, thereby appealing to serious readers, a generally older echelon of society who might buy their books from old-fashioned physical establishments or, perhaps, just borrow them from a library. By this reasoning Amazon categorizes Morrison according to the logic of the syllabus. LibraryThing, inversely, defines her according to the tautological pairing of “leisure” and “serious” reading—reading that does not require Cliffs Notes, but might require works of literary criticism. This would align with my second speculation here, that this result may be another manifestation of the power of temporal framing in literary culture. The temporal frame of LibraryThing’s ‘collocations’ extends to the full historical arc of each user’s collection practice, whether they took ten years or two weeks to assemble their libraries. On Amazon that frame is opaque but perhaps more limited, depending on what time frame they use to define “Customers who bought X also bought Y”—in
the same purchase, the same month, or year, or simply all books bought by the same user. The shadow of Oprah’s Book Club here is the first verifiable instance of the “innate” rules of canon formation (by which I mean lines of authorship and genre) being broken in the face of a non-academic cultural force. *Oprah* is a form of entertainment, and the book club is ostensibly a leisure activity (whatever its intellectual demands on participants). The fundamentally academic and class-oriented structures of literary taste are reformulated according to Oprah’s selections, which range from the contemporary (Morrison) to conservative classics (Tolstoy, Faulkner, García Márquez).

We see literary pleasure at work all over these networks, of course—readers find an author or a mystery series they enjoy, and they return to that ‘brand’ repeatedly. But the influence of Oprah as a literary critic granting her imprimatur to certain novels marks a different form of cultural distinction, one that is externally suggested from an authoritative cultural elite. However, the distinction that holds between the ‘Oprah’s Picks’ clique and the ‘African American Lit’ clique centered on Morrison holds not just at the k=8 level but through k=7, k=6 and k=5 (not shown) as well, suggesting that Morrison’s power as a source of cultural distinction holds its own against the critical influence of *Oprah*. The canon of Book Club selections is equal in prestige and consistency to the canon of Morrison’s work, which here is inclusive enough to incorporate more and more other African American writers as the limits of the clique are relaxed.

This is what happens when we study the movements of books in commercial and non-commercial cultural spaces. The rules of attraction discussed above shape the
choices that bring us into contact with books, but when we read them an entirely new set of engagements takes place, which I will address in the next section.

The Culture Game: Morrison and Professional Reviews

Exploring recommendations networks is a deceptive sort of empirical research, as it involves analyzing the output of other models and algorithms that have already groomed and regularized the data of normal human interaction. However Amazon defines the associations it tracks, it has already eliminated the misspelled and misplaced titles, abandoned shopping carts and other lost texts that define the material and digital experience with literary commodities. Turning from the beginning to the end of the cultural process of literary consumption/production leads us to confront a different kind of algorithm, the system by which, as Bourdieu put it, critics “reproduce…the space within which they are themselves classified” (Distinction 235).

By treating the reviews themselves as cultural objects which can be used to both glimpse the field they articulate and understand the literary context critics use to interpellate a new author, this approach remains grounded in the textual exchange of ideas, rather than attempting to flesh out societal structures, as several scholars have in the past.39 Since reviewers themselves are acutely conscious of previous reviews and geometries of prestige within the spaces of literary criticism (Curran 230), it makes sense to approach Morrison’s accumulated reviews as a kind of oeuvre in itself, a self-conscious and sustained collective evaluation of her position over the course of her

39Bourdieu’s seminal studies of artistic production in The Field of Cultural Production have been joined more recently by work by James Curran and Grant Blank. However, as Blank notes, cultural reviews remain relatively unstudied in sociology.
writing career. Since the publication of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, at the relatively late age of thirty-nine, Morrison’s stature has grown rapidly. In the decades since then, reviews of her work have taken on tropes and repeated themes of their own as writers grapple with her fame, her literary legacy and the complex interweaving of characters and narratives across her novels.

The best way to explore this decades-long performance of literary reception is to consider her professional reviews in aggregate, by exploring those books and writers which have appeared in three or more reviews of Morrison’s work across the entire span of her authorial career. In Figure 15 we can see the breadth of cultural responses to her fiction, which range from Melville and Freud to Hurston, Walker and Winfrey. In these images, connections are defined as nouns that appear together in the same review; the nodes in this image have been further limited to only those collocations that occurred in four or more reviews (out of a total corpus of 75 reviews). This image represents the central conceptual canon of these professional reviews: the consistent references that reviewers have made in connection to Morrison’s work spanning her career to date. Centrality is roughly approximated here by placing the more well-connected nodes closer to the center of the diagram. Each node is connected to some percentage of other nodes in the network (represented numerically in gray boxes to the right of each node). Morrison is connected to every node here since her name was mentioned in all 75 reviews of her work; therefore, her

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40 The corpus includes all reviews of Morrison’s work (including a few substantive book release-related profiles) to appear in established, nationally recognized reviewing publications in the United States. These included both newspapers (*Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Post*) and magazines (*Nation, Newsweek, Time, New Yorker, and New York Review of Books*). The goal was to identify widely read publications with consistent patterns of reviewing that could be applied not only to Morrison but other authors in my wider study.
centrality measure is 1.0. The resulting image presents the core of Morrison’s professional literary self, a portrait of the author painted by her own professional interlocutors, the critics.

![Image of a network diagram showing collocations of nouns in professional reviews of Toni Morrison’s novels]

Figure 15: Collocations of nouns in professional reviews of Toni Morrison’s novels

The temporal axis makes its presence felt in these reviews through the higher prestige accorded to earlier texts (the date of publication for Morrison’s novels is noted parenthetically in the image). These early works define the Morrisonian frame of reference: the novels Song of Solomon, Beloved, The Bluest Eye and Sula all play important roles for reviewers as both critical yardsticks and guideposts for readers contemplating a new publication. Song of Solomon, in particular, stands out as the most well-connected of all Morrison’s novels, and its immediate neighbors include all other Morrison fiction. In another sense, Morrison’s earlier temporal foundations are
also on display here: about a third of all the authors present in this diagram are titans like Faulkner, Whitman and Twain. Her reviewers place her in the same constellation as these American “classics” in part because of comparisons to their fiction and in part because of her own critical response to the American literary tradition in *Playing in the Dark*, where she argues for the profound impact of the (often silenced, often erased) African figure on the American psyche. In this sense, the network reflects Morrison’s position as a particularly polyvalent figure in American letters as an editor, writer, provocateur, academic, critic and leading proponent of the African American Studies movement.

The “Morrison” node at the center of this network pulls together a diverse set of signifiers (or, as Gates might put it, engages in complicated “signifyin’”) around the heart of the graph. These nouns effectively catalog the process by which Morrison was inducted into the pantheon of American literary gods and her connections to a close core of writers indicate the pathway to that apotheosis. A stylistic and thematic web of comparisons links Morrison, Wright, Ellison and Faulkner with the younger generation of Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara. Separately, Morrison shares ties to Faulkner through several of her novels, and Faulkner strengthens her affiliation with modernism, Woolf, Hemingway and other “American classics” nodes. The most important part of this engine of literary ascendance is also the easiest to overlook: those nodes on the fringes of the network (less tightly connected than the writers just discussed, but still integral to the central core of Morrison’s literary networks).

Michiko Kakutani and John Leonard, the *Books of the Times* and *The New Yorker*: these repeat critics and persistent reviewing platforms have played an important role in
building Morrison’s fame and, not incidentally, linking their evaluations and their publications to her affirmed brilliance.

The network also reveals some of the ways in which critics respond to the multiple valences of Morrison’s work, the way she blends biblical allusion, modernist style and African American themes, and the ways in which the predominantly white publishing industry “marks” African American texts in particular ways (J. K. Young 5). Morrison successfully defined a distinctively, self-consciously black voice in American letters, addressing the challenging history and politics of that ethnic identity, while nevertheless achieving wide popularity among all American readers. Where Richard Wright was infamously asked to rewrite the closing of *Native Son* in a more positive light for the Book-of-the-Month Club, Morrison seems to pull no punches as she explores slavery, rape, and many kinds of social oppression in her work (Radway, *Feeling for Books* 286-7). While they address these themes, the critics correctly identify Morrison as an American writer who crosses a number of boundaries, frequently mentioning her not only with Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin but also William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Gabriel García Márquez is almost as central here as Toni Cade Bambara, and Morrison is included in an American literary tradition that ranges from Mark Twain to Ernest Hemingway.

**Readers at Work: Morrison’s Amazon Reviews**

In her conclusion to *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway argues that the study of everyday literary consumption reinstates “active individuals and their
creative, constructive activities at the heart of our interpretive enterprise [where] the essential human practice of making meaning goes on.” (*Reading the Romance* 221). While Amazon is not a book group, the site fosters a sense of community around each book in its catalog by allowing users to write reviews and vote on the reviews of others, implicitly endorsing this kind of self-expression as a form of literary evaluation just as useful as the other data presented on each book’s page: its sales rank, category, recommendations and so on. By conferring on users the entitlement to evaluate books and to see their words appear in essentially the same format as the judgments of professional critics, Amazon encourages emotional and intellectual investment. It also provides a virtual space for readers to, as Elizabeth Long put it describing book clubs, “create a conversation that begins with the book each woman has read but moves beyond the book to include the personal connections and meanings each has found in the book…At its best, this kind of discussion is profoundly transformative” (144). Unlike most professional critics, but like members of a traditional book club, these Amazon reviewers often share the emotional experience of reading a book, literally writing themselves into the narrative of the review.

Looking at the consumer reviews of Morrison’s work quickly reveals that the rules of the literary field change dramatically when the evaluators of a text are not professional critics. In fact, the economic equation is reversed: critics are paid to write book reviews, while everyday readers typically pay for the privilege by buying the books. Both forms of review take place in complicated cultural spaces and defy simplistic analysis of reviewers’ motivations. Professional critics address lofty ideals of literary culture while striving to maintain a consistent cultural product of their own,
and their authority as critics rests on opaque assertions of class, employment, publication and previous judgments. Amazon’s consumers speak to a more commercial ideal of the book as a product that is reviewed on a simple five-star scale with a box for comments. Their reviews, however, create an equally complex cultural space of motivations: Amazon provides architectures of prestige for reviewers to achieve status within the site, yet some reviewers post their comments anonymously. The reviews themselves range from employing the language and implicit rhetorical claims of the professionals to reading diaries, educational narratives, testimonials and many other *sui generis* forms.

Overall, the Amazon network presents a much more canonical version of Morrison, retaining her links to figures like Dickens and Hemingway, Hurston and Faulkner, but minimizing her literary and editorial connections to younger black writers. In part this can be explained by our units of measurement: by defining collocations as shared presence in a single review, we give the longer, more reference-packed professional reviews an advantage in terms of the number of links emanating from each node. At 112,920 words, the professional corpus averages out to 1506 words per review. The larger Amazon corpus, 374,845 words, has only 174 words in the average review. Considering this diversity, it is surprising that Amazon reviews make as many connections as they do in such compact form, but once again the diversity of approaches within the Amazon reviewing community makes the analysis interesting. While some readers write very short reviews, non-referential reviews, or evaluations of the book as an object and Amazon’s customer service, others take more involved and discursive approaches to reviewing, providing a wealth of critical forms.
Figure 16: “Black” Subnet in Professional Reviews of *Beloved*
Figure 17: “Black” subnet in Amazon reviews of Beloved

The most striking distinctions between professional critics and everyday readers emerge when their responses to a particular element of Morrison’s literary
networks are compared, for example, the node “Black.” Figure 16 and Figure 17 produce the subnets around this highly charged node in Morrison’s professional and Amazon reviews of Beloved, a novel widely recognized for its meditations on race in America. I generated these images using the same methods as Figure 15: here, nodes that appeared together in at least three reviews of Beloved share a link, with Figure 16 representing the professional review corpus and Figure 17 the Amazon review corpus. One surprising distinction is the node “White” in the Amazon “Black” subnet, an entity proscribed by AP style. The presence of “White” in these consumer reviews can be read in a number of different ways. On a superficial level this may demonstrate an anxiety about grammatical categories that often leads to excessive capitalization.

Underlying this choice, however, is what appears to be a cultural logic of equivalence and attempted political correctness—if African American is capitalized, then White should be as well—and this is exactly what we see in the Amazon references quoted at the end of this paragraph. Since “White” is such a rare proper noun in professional reviews it is difficult to compare usage; far easier to explore the sub-networks of “Black” in both cultural arenas. While professional publications and customers alike vary in their capitalization of “Black”, the word frequently appears capitalized in book and article titles. This particular use, as an introductory signifier (for example: “America Means Black, Too” titling a review of *Jazz*) is pervasive within the corpus of professional reviews. In fact, the way “White” slips past copy-editors is fascinating in its own strangely Freudian way: in professional reviews it is

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41 Black was lemmatized in a very limited way here to include “Blacks” and “Black Life” (the latter term occurring only once in each corpus). Reviewers used a number of other racial descriptors, including “African American” and “Negro,” but I felt each of these terms carries significant distinguishing connotations that it would be a mistake to ignore.
mentioned most often in discussing books by black writers: *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* by Morrison and *White Rat* by Gayl Jones (9 and 3 appearances respectively). Aside from references to those two books and instances where “White” begins a sentence (again quite often in quoted dialog from African American fiction), “White” makes three appearances in professional reviews: “Snow White,” “White Castles” (plural of the fast food chain) and the “Great White Narcissists.” By contrast, in Amazon reviews “White” is almost always used as an explicit racial signifier, frequently in parallel with “Black”: “anti-White language”; “African American culture/literature…White culture/society”; “Black People White People”; “Blacks and Whites”.42

The two “Black” subnets provide other clues about how different groups of readers engage in the cultural construction of race. By the very limitation of only considering nodes appearing frequently in reviews of a single novel, this comparison renders these groups’ interpretations of Morrison’s incendiary exploration of slavery and the African American experience in *Beloved*. The words connected to “Black” in the professional dataset are a predictable subset of the same concepts that we have seen throughout this study: several Morrison novels, “America,” and the ever-present Alfred A. Knopf, her publishing company. The presence of the imprint is downplayed in the typical book review, listed alongside the price and publication date in a block of information that the reader’s eye quickly grazes over. Yet its appearance here is a reminder of the argument John Young makes in *Black Writers, White Publishers*:

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42 Intriguingly, Amazon users almost never begin a sentence with a capitalized “White”—only two of the 33 instances of the word started a sentence in the Amazon corpus. In professional reviews, by contrast, 9 out of 25 appearances of “White” started a sentence.
predominantly white publishing houses continue to dictate the nature of “Black literature” and to inflect its marketing and cultural influence. Knopf is closely linked with Morrison’s name in professional reviews because they are her cultural underwriters as much as Oprah or Morrison herself, and in that way the name plays a major role in defining this particular network of ‘Blackness.’

Far more surprising in the professional network is the presence of Dickens, who is at best a minor character in reviews of Morrison’s texts. The connection here is complex, linking the two authors variously through their employments of the supernatural, their shared use of ambitious titles and character names, and in a casual reference to behavior among colonial citizens in the Caribbean. Because these collocations are defined as two nouns appearing in the same article (as opposed to the same sentence or paragraph), Dickens is not directly associated with Morrison’s ‘Blackness’ in these reviews, and yet his presence is a ghostly counterpoint to the intense, occasionally magical realism of Morrison’s prose. Dickens, too, was a popular author who explored subcultures of oppression and the social divisions of class, and his employment of the supernatural is a means of transcending such boundaries. Dickens’s presence in the “Black” subnet speaks to the commercially and canonically rooted formal tools Morrison employs in her fiction and the culture of publishing and reviewing that contextualizes this literary “Blackness” through a familiar canonical frame.

The subnet generated from the corpus of Amazon reviews offers a very different understanding of “Black” as a literary concept, expanding this network into a different frame through several additions. The only Morrison character in the
professional subnet is Sethe (*Beloved*), but Amazon readers also link “Black” to First Corinthians, Pilate, Guitar and Macon (all from *Song of Solomon*) as well as Pecola Breedlove (*The Bluest Eye*). As these consumers make abundantly clear in their reviews, the details of characterization and plotting are extremely important to them, since identification and literary empathy play a major role in their evaluations. For these non-professional readers, “Black” is defined by Morrison’s characters as much as it is by literary form or a book jacket photo of an African American author. In the place of Dickens we get Faulkner, along with “English,” a node incorporating various references to English literature and language classes. Faulkner plays a role similar to Dickens, acting as a known quantity from a more traditional western canon, but he also represents the way in which Morrison is taught in “English” classes, as part of a distinctly American literary tradition. Finally, the presence of “White,” as discussed above, represents these consumers’ more explicit approach to the dialectical challenges (along with many others) of defining and even conceptualizing the language of race. “Black” links to “White,” to “African,” to “African American,” and of course to every other node in the subnet, making it a cultural crossroads in these networks like Morrison herself, conveying many meanings to many readers. We see an inverse relationship between the nuance of the reviews themselves and the nuance present in these graphs—the professional reviewers allow many things to go unsaid and unnamed.
New Horizons, New Readers

At first glance it might seem as if the new networks on Amazon recapitulate the old: the heavy emphasis on “English” and the context of the school suggest that the academy is still the major site of cultural elevation and that the emergence of established canonical hierarchies implies that the marketplace is only following the rules set by other cultural powers. But there are some vital distinctions between the landscape that Guillory and Bourdieu described and the digital spaces of new reading. To begin with, while some of the topics are familiar, the subjects discussing them invert the lines of power from traditional cultural structures. Here, students are the most active contributors to the subject “English” as they discuss the Morrison books they have read in school assignments. The democratized commercial space of Amazon opens up a new space for distinction where students can reject or endorse the canons being imposed on them through syllabi and reading lists. This is, in a sense, the kind of “counterhegemonic public” that allows a culturally marginalized group to develop a collective voice, continuously reasserting moments of individual autonomy within a capitalist system.43 In terms of distinction, however, the impact is real. User reviews have a widely acknowledged effect on influencing future purchases and lead to an entirely new structure of distinction as consumers turn to one another in navigating the “long tail.” Online reviews establish a vital distinction between what we are obligated, encouraged or merely tempted to buy and what we have read and enjoyed.

The second point to make here is that websites like Amazon, through their focus on clear navigation of thousands of books, also work to make structures of

43 Elizabeth Long quotes this term from Nancy Fraser in exploring a similar possibility among book clubs (219-20).
prestige and canonicity more visible. Through linking algorithms like their recommendations engines, they have created and shared a new form of cultural context to join the kinds of implicit and explicit contextual cues presented in bookstores, critical reviews and in literary conversation. These webs of reference contain far more detail than, say, the New York Times bestseller lists, and allow us to perceive clustering effects like single-author magnetism in Morrison or Bolaño. These clusters, particularly the pervasive Cliffs Notes, trace out what we might think of as literary-economic feedback loops, where a particular author or editorial group have created a successful exchange with the market. The Cliffs Notes network is the most transparent of these structures-made-visible, since its intention is in fact to monetize and streamline the transfer of cultural capital traditionally performed at school.

By creating spaces not just for numerical evaluation and shopping but for real discussion, however, websites like Amazon have also created new opportunities for the human targets of cultural commerce, the readers and consumers who are the intended audience of book reviews as much as advertising. When these consumers begin producing through their consumption, a new discourse emerges that can quickly diverge from the standards of professional style and even establish political positions around subtle but fundamental differences in language. For these readers, “Black” and “White” are both in play, and both are tied up not only with books but the characters, the people within those books. This focus on characters suggests another way in which Morrison distinguishes herself significantly from Pynchon in her relationship with her readers. As the figures above demonstrate, emotional investment and empathy play
major roles of readers of Morrison’s work as they come to know complex, realistic and psychologically sophisticated people occupying the imagined spaces of her work.

In contrast, Pynchon characters are parodies, pastiches and vehicles for other kinds of intellectual critique. They might collectively be summed up by one of V.’s protagonists, a man named Stencil. These characters are clearly stand-ins for other things, and they suffer in a universe that is far more arbitrary and dubious in its causality than Morrison’s fictional worlds, where narrative certainties hang over her more human characters like swords of Damocles. In short, Pynchon inspires a very different kind of reading in the expansive meaning of that term I laid out in the introduction. The collective acts of interpretation that Pynchon evokes are intensely cultural and referential, driven by the need to map out the “network” of connections that he lays out through layered allusions and complicated literary jokes. For Morrison’s readers, the game is very different and its emotional stakes are higher.

Morrison’s Amazon reviews are full of other characters, namely the readers themselves in narratives of personal transformation: “I don’t ever remember being so moved by a novel. When I was done [reading Song of Solomon], I knew myself better than I ever thought I could” (Hazell). These reviews make explicit the subaltern anxieties and arguments that professional reviews, and even some classrooms and book clubs, would never air. One anonymous reviewer of Beloved described her book club’s refusal to confront the novel and its emotional challenges, including “white guilt” and other varieties of emotional pain: “were readers dismissing the novel out of a need to dismiss a subject that makes people (both black & white) squirm, or were the claims legitimate?”(“Powerful, Wonderfully ‘Uncomfortable’ and Aply Avoided”)
These are precisely the questions that Morrison has sought to inspire as she has continued to define writing that is “indisputably black,” approaching the problem of the dual audience as an opportunity for powerful new kinds of dialog (*The Bluest Eye* xii).

Morrison’s readers are creating new structures of connection and affiliation online, and leaving individual records of their critical acts. By upending the small chorus of critically and academically entitled opinions on literature, digital media are slowly creating new kinds of collective consciousness about how and why we read. As e-book readers and online tools create yet more forms of sharing, from popular highlighted passages (i.e. on the Amazon Kindle) to real-time interactions with authors through services like Twitter, the social sphere of literature is expanding from writers and critics to include millions of readers. More than ever, new technologies are encouraging readers to heed Morrison’s call to “work with the author in the construction of the book” (*What Moves at the Margin* 59). The “discourse that follows” here is reshaping the basic rules of contemporary authorial fame and the structures of distinction we rely on to discover new texts and new ideas.

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44 Morrison has in fact endorsed the Kindle as a tool for reading (“Toni Morrison Discusses Amazon Kindle”).
Chapter 3

Díaz and Wallace: Revolutions in Style

The transition from the corporate merger frenzy of the 1990s to the current literary field marked a major shift in fortunes for authors: the decline of the “mid-list” in favor of blockbusters and first-time novelists who might be dropped after a single unsuccessful book. In the decade since, our cultural hindsight is clearing and we can begin to identify a generational shift in literature towards a new fictional style intensely focused on the increasingly mesmeric impact of popular culture and the human experience. A group of “Generation X” authors, from Douglas Coupland and Brett Easton Ellis to Michael Chabon and Jennifer Egan began bending genres and narrative perspectives to capture the intense mediation of contemporary American life.

In this chapter I’d like to focus on two representatives of this generation who have pioneered new kinds of authorial positions. In 1996 David Foster Wallace published his second novel, *Infinite Jest*, the same year as Junot Díaz’s *Drown* arrived. Both writers attracted major attention for their remarkable styles and bold departures from convention, and, as I will argue below, both came to be defined by their unique relationships to the literary marketplace.

Wallace and Díaz both developed, and have been celebrated primarily for, distinctive literary styles. A significant component of their fame has involved recognition of these stylistic innovations and the ways in which they adapt elements of postmodern technical showmanship to reinvent genres of writing that are usually much

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45 This story is well told in Jason Epstein’s *Book Business*. 
more earnest and unaffected. Most importantly, both have done this successfully, avoiding the hazards of and formalist irony and genre-bound writing as they deliver clear moral and political messages to the literary arena through their fiction. This chapter will address each writer in turn in an abbreviated case study before considering how both writers have turned the highly reflexive, media-saturated traits of “nerd” style to their own purposes. Beginning with parallel critiques of the political role of language in the American cultural mainstream, these authors have developed two very different literary projects in response.

**Becoming David Foster Wallace: The Afterlife of Reception**

If there is one thing to be learned from David Foster Wallace, it is that cultural transmission is a tricky thing. This was a problem Wallace confronted as a literary professional, a university-based writer during what Mark McGurl has called the Program Era. But it was also a philosophical issue he grappled with on a deep level as he struggled to combat his own loneliness through writing. This fundamental concern with literature as a social, collaborative enterprise has also gained some popularity among scholars of contemporary American literature, particularly McGurl and James English: both critics explore the rules by which prestige or cultural distinction is awarded to authors (English; McGurl). Their approach requires a certain amount of empirical work, since these claims move beyond the individual experience of the text into forms of collective reading and cultural exchange influenced by social class, geographical location, education, ethnicity, and other factors. Yet McGurl and
English’s groundbreaking work is limited by the very forms of exclusivity they analyze: the protective bubble of creative writing programs in the academy and the elite economy of prestige surrounding literary prizes, respectively. To really study the problem of cultural transmission, we need to look beyond the symbolic markets of prestige to the real market, the site of mass literary consumption, where authors succeed or fail based on their ability to speak to that most diverse and complicated of readerships: the general public. Unless we study what I call the social lives of books, we make the mistake of keeping literature in the same ascetic laboratory that Wallace tried to break out of with his intense authorial focus on popular culture, mass media, and everyday life.

I’d like to begin by offering three conjectures about Wallace that we can explore with empirical data, allowing us to make some grounded claims about Wallace’s ongoing literary impact.

1) Wallace is *different*: unlike contemporaries such as Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, Jonathan Lethem, or Michael Chabon, Wallace employs a style wildly divergent from anyone else on the literary scene. He pioneered a radical new narrative voice so successfully that editors now complain about the endless pitches: “I’d like to do a David Foster Wallace take on ______” (Lipsky 320). As we will soon see, this uniqueness resulted in an oeuvre with a deep interiority to it, a cluster of texts that beckon readers almost invariably to read more Wallace, more of the “literary equivalent of cocaine” that they simply could not find anywhere else (Lipsky 157).

2) Wallace is *postmodern*, not just in his thematic and stylistic approaches to narrative but in a historical sense; his books speak to Pynchon, Barth, and DeLillo in a
way that they rarely do to younger novelists. The pointedly difficult style of massive, occasionally antagonistic tomes like *Gravity’s Rainbow* is magnified, footnoted, and distilled into Wallace’s own particular blend of militant cultural critique and eloquent despair.

3) Wallace is *integral*. Despite being so frequently lost in the funhouse of postmodern prose experiments, his earnest narrative approach aspires to the unity of experience as we perceive it—the ways in which we stitch together mediated fragments and jumbled thoughts into coherent stories of ourselves. This individual, intellectual definition of the word has a collective parallel in the ways that Wallace’s work encourages readers to work together on this project of integration. Wallace has been incredibly effective at uniting a diverse readership around his intense fictions of loss, addiction, and pervasive loneliness precisely because he enrolls each of them in the project of his fictional calculus, of approximating the area under the contemporary curve. As a number of scholars have noted, Wallace’s fear of loneliness was tempered by his faith in the potential of literature to bridge the gap between each of our consciousnesses. His iterative, splintered, capture-each-detail-under-the-curve-to-describe-the-curve approach has obviously succeeded with readers, who gladly do the work of completing the equation, responding to genuine honesty in his texts in spite of the postmodern distancing that makes such work necessary.
Wallace was deeply attuned to his own commercial obligations and the material risks of authorship, airing his concerns about the subject a number of times to interviewers. He also compared himself to his peers several times in print, but my analysis of Amazon recommendations below reveals how different he really was from others of his generation. The images that follow are based on the first ten things that are recommended by the “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought” panel on each book page, starting from *Infinite Jest* and fanning out from there to three levels of depth. These networks fluctuate over time, so Figure 18 is a synthesis of four different scans of Amazon recommendations conducted over a period from August 2010 to January 2011, showing only those texts that appeared consistently over this period. The gray oval demarcates what I will call the Wallace subnet—an intricately interconnected zone of texts where buyers of one Wallace book are highly likely to purchase another. In fact on Amazon Wallace’s recommendations almost invariably point browsers to more Wallace texts (including the criticism, reading guides and biographical material on the edge of the circle in Figure 18. This is very unusual. For comparison, as of February 4, 2011, Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* linked to nine “external” novels in addition to *The Corrections*—more outgoing links than Wallace’s cumulative total for the six-month period represented here. On the same day, Richard Powers’s *Generosity* pointed to seven external books out of ten.

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46 For instance, he brought up the subject of publishers’ advance payments five times during his interview with David Lipsky (2, 14-15, 28, 110, 240-242).
My broader research indicates that with better-established writers like Toni Morrison, these figures are even higher, as celebrated novels enter into “super-canons” that transcend authorship. But for our purposes here, the point I am illustrating is simple: Wallace is different.

Beyond the glaring absence of links, we can prove this point by taking a closer look at the external texts recommended from the Wallace subnet. These links reflect a cultural marketplace struggling to effectively contextualize Wallace. His idiosyncratic essays in Consider the Lobster were connected to Volpone and Other Plays by Ben Jonson in the August 2010 data, breaking the genre barrier and linking him to a historical period very different from his own. The connection may be inspired, drawing the two texts together into a synthetic analysis of satire and human observation: perhaps some summer school syllabus asked students to compare Wallace’s “Big Red Sun” and Jonson’s “Bartholemew Fair” as explorations of sexuality in public spectacles. Whatever the origins of this connection, it puts Wallace in rare company, underscoring both his distinction (for being connected to a highbrow, non-contemporary non-novel) and his cultural quirkiness (connecting him not to Shakespeare, for example, but a writer of second-order canonical status).

This combination of idiosyncrasy and non-standard links continues around the oval of the Wallace subnet as we consider the novels recommended from Brief Interviews with Hideous Men. This, perhaps Wallace’s most avant-garde text, leads to classically postmodern writers William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon. The link from

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47 My work on Morrison, most notably, demonstrates how her fiction transcends an African American canonical space to connect to prominent works from other canonical groups (i.e. Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony) as well as a trans-historical “Great American Reading List” ranging from Hawthorne and Twain to Hemingway and Fitzgerald, not to mention Dostoyevsky and Joyce.
one collection of innovative short stories to another is relatively unsurprising, though the link once again invites browsers of the relatively mainstream Wallace to consider a text significantly farther down the long tail of literary obscurity. As with the Ben Jonson plays, the arrows pointing in towards Wallace here make more economic sense: Amazon’s feedback loop with previous shoppers suggests that readers of renaissance satire or postmodern fiction might be sold on a young writer with similar things to offer. But the proposition is much harder to make in reverse, precisely because it involves a move from the relatively well-understood contemporary scene to the smaller market of the backlist, where editions can easily go out of print and the whole apparatus of professional reviews and interviews has much less sway. The arrows pointing out once again distinguish Wallace from his contemporaries, whom readers almost always link in more obvious ways to recent works and similar genre spaces.

The *Vineland* connection offers another kind of peculiarity, placing as it does one of Wallace’s less approachable books in dialog with one of Pynchon’s most approachable. In terms of thematic and temporal distance, this link makes much more taxonomic sense than the leap from Wallace to Jonson, but it also highlights the complex forces inflecting literary culture. *Vineland* seems to be connected to the wrong book here—its focus on media-saturated, television-steeped California life has a great deal in common with *Infinite Jest*. But once again the shopping carts have spoken, and its link with *Brief Interviews* is a double bond of mutual reinforcement. There are no direct mentions of *Vineland* in the customer reviews of *Brief Interviews of Hideous Men*, but Pynchon is a persistent presence. As one Amazon reviewer put it,
Writers can be divided into two major types: poets and scientists. If poet-writers are your thing—guys like Henry Miller, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, or J.D. Salinger—stay away from this book. Wallace is a mad scientist, a manipulator of storytelling's double helix. Instead of going for the heart he opts for the brain. Some authors paint pictures [sic]; this guy makes Rubik’s cubes. He out-Pynchons Pynchon. (dgillz)

But why *Vineland*? As two relatively approachable books by postmodern authors, it’s possible that this link represents the influence of college syllabi, where professors are often constrained to select authors’ shorter works in order to cover more ground. One can easily imagine the “Introduction to Postwar American Fiction” course in which the two books would be assigned.

Far less mysterious are the links between *Vineland* and *Gravity's Rainbow* and the connection between the latter and *Infinite Jest*. These two books seem to have everything in common: sweeping encyclopedic novels widely regarded as their authors’ major triumphs, they also address similar themes of individual agency, drug use, psychology and technology with similar postmodern styles. I will discuss Wallace’s larger relationship to Pynchon below in more detail, so for now let us focus instead on the other texts connected to *Infinite Jest*, which exist in surprising tension with one another. Wallace’s magnum opus is the only node in his subnet to behave in what I would term a “normal” way, interacting extensively with books by other writers and contextualizing this novelist’s work in larger historical and cultural zones. A preoccupation with genre writing also defines the rest of *Infinite Jest*’s connections here, from Ellroy’s postmodern crime fiction to Danielewski and Ellis’s complex
literary relationships with film. Indeed, perhaps the most surprising link of all here is Alice Hoffman’s *Practical Magic*, a text that in other maps of this network immediately spirals off into a Hoffman universe with its own set of interior linkages among her novels, short stories, and young adult fiction. The novel that readers have aligned with *Infinite Jest* is *Practical Magic*, historical fiction with a magical twist that also brings it into dialog with Pynchon’s often-fantastical *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Yet this, too, is a strange book to put in contact with Wallace; its approachable style is more in line with Oprah’s Book Club than Wallace’s postmodernist cadre. The only strong connection seems to be through the thematic of film, a major subject for Wallace: *Practical Magic* is the only Hoffman novel to be adapted to the screen, in 1998. This would also explain its connection to *Sanctuary*, which was adapted as *The Story of Temple Drake* in 1933.

Wallace is different: this much we know for certain, based on his unusually introverted network and the unlikely ways in which that clump of texts does connect to outsiders. The rest, and in particular this speculative argument about the role of adaptation and the influence of film on literary production, is guesswork extrapolated from the data presented in Figure 18. The focus of his work, particularly *Infinite Jest*, on the relationship between film, television, and the individual is reflected not only in texts that address similar postmodern problems, such as *Vineland*, but on a meta-level with narratives of authors who grappled with the same problems in their lives. Cast in this light, Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* acts as an anchor that has remained constant over the span of my analysis, grounding an evolving contextual Wallace canon of texts that illuminate the abusive, addictive relationships we have with media and the power
those relationships wield over the production of literature itself. Nevertheless the persistence of this theme reveals the significant point that Wallace is contextualized not just along genre lines but in very sophisticated ways, regardless of whether or not I am correct about the thematic details. In the next section I will build on another set of grounded observations to discuss the remarkable difference between this nuanced, wide-ranging contextualization of his work and the much more limited versions of postmodernism that professional reviewers employ to explain Wallace to their readers.

Wallace is Postmodern

Before most of us contemplate purchasing a novel we turn to reviews, and literary criticism continues to define Wallace’s legacy through the publication of *Fate, Time, and Language* and *The Pale King* in 2010 and 2011, respectively. These reviews impact sales of the latest title as well as the full body of work, adjusting the author’s cultural position. This was an evaluative process that Wallace felt keenly, organized, as he described it in “E Pluribus Unam,” by “the writerly generation that precedes us, reviews us, and designs our grad-school curricula” (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again* 43). The interpretive dialog of author and critic seemed to haunt Wallace even at the early height of his fame, for instance in the way he kept returning to Sven Birkerts’ review of *Infinite Jest* in the *Atlantic* over the course of his long interview with David Lipsky. Only when Birkerts had endorsed the novel did Wallace decree,

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48 Faulkner disingenuously claimed he wrote *Sanctuary* as an attempt to make money by appealing to the lowest common denominator of reader appetites (“Faulkner Was Wrong About ‘Sanctuary’”).
“yeah, it felt done then” (253). The negative press cut just as deeply, especially Michiko Kakutani’s mixed review in the *New York Times* (Lipsky 92).

Applying the same ‘distant reading’ lens to professional reviews allows us to consider these interpretive acts as another body of work, a professional filter built up over years of book reviews and sustained critical engagements. In Figure 19, Wallace’s books are connected to other texts through collocation in professional reviews: book titles that appear together in the same paragraph of a particular review are linked, with multiple such collocations indicated by thicker connecting lines. The peculiar connections we just observed in Amazon’s recommendations networks are replaced here by a far more predictable set of canonical touchstones. Where Amazon opened strange pathways through Wallace, bridging Elizabethan drama and contemporary experimental fiction, the critics place him squarely in an intellectual tradition of Serious Young Men writing in the shadow of Serious Established Men.49

The temporal specificity of the diagram is striking: Wallace is linked primarily to those members of the “preceding writerly generation,” the authors against whom he has been measured and contextualized throughout his career. In the eyes of professional reviewers, Wallace is triangulated between Pynchon, Barth, and DeLillo, postmodern not just stylistically but historically: nearly half of the books in Figure 19 not penned by Wallace himself were written before 1980. The historical and stylistic senses of the term are conflated here by critics who assign Wallace to a more abstract plane than his contemporaries, thereby distancing him from the present and once again emphasizing his difference by historicizing him with another generation of

49 This network is almost entirely male, with the exception of Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*).
writers. This critical alignment with the past was often deliberate: Wallace felt his own literary conversation with Barth in Girl with Curious Hair was “simultaneously absolutely homicidal and a fawning homage,” or exactly the kind of genetic relationship that orients the critical apparatus to literary history instead of the anxious present (Lipsky 226). Of course, even quick perusal of the reviews indicates that this interpretation is incomplete—Wallace’s close attention to the heavily mediated present tense is widely recognized. But this fealty to literary history parallels the more imaginative market reactions we traced in Figure 18 that linked Wallace to some of the same postmodern authors as well as some older literary taproots, such as Jonson.
Figure 19: Professional Review Collocations, Wallace
DeLillo, Barth, Pynchon: of the three, one author truly dominates Wallace’s contextual connections in this image, and his iconic novel acts as an anti-center, a competing nexus of prestige to Wallace’s network. Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (connected to 14 books) is second only to *Infinite Jest* (17 books) in terms of prestige, and it works as a gateway to a relatively distinct subnet of classic high postmodernism. This cluster of encyclopedic novels is the result of a single paragraph in a *Chicago Tribune* review of *Infinite Jest* listing each of the texts in the subnet—Gaddis, Barth, Elkin, DeLillo, Vollmann—and concluding with the undisputed centerpiece:

and especially Thomas Pynchon's magnificent reimagining of the Second World War as the defining event of this century's past and future ("Gravity's Rainbow")—all these daunting (and, to various degrees, brilliant) fictions underlie David Foster Wallace's blackly funny vision of America in the years just ahead. (Allen)

Allen’s thoroughness might have exceeded that of his peers, but this critical frame is reiterated several times in Wallace’s professional reviews, where his work is linked repeatedly to Pynchon’s. Throughout his career as a subject of professional book reviews, Wallace was described by and measured against *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but that iconic comparison also sometimes led critics to places removed from Wallace himself, as the quote above implies through its almost overzealous delineation of a canon. The *Tribune* associates Wallace with “crowded, polyphonic, loose and baggy monsters of

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50 The quote also marks another moment in the history of what Mark Grief, after James Wood, has called “big, ambitious novels” (Greif).
immediately previous postwar literary generations,” but ultimately Pynchon “especially” is the yardstick against which his work is most consistently measured.

Of course, there are other postmodern texts all over the diagram. The books that share Pynchon’s close alignment with Wallace tell another interesting story about their relative literary positions: *Naked Lunch, Lolita, and A Clockwork Orange* all connect directly to *Infinite Jest*, placing Wallace squarely within a tradition of writing that is both thematically and formally transgressive. Burroughs and Nabokov are also linked into a subnet of other Wallace fiction, suggesting their value as texts that reviewers have consistently referred to since the publication of Wallace’s first novel, *The Broom of the System*. We can contrast this tight interweaving of novels with the more diffuse ways in which Wallace’s non-fiction writing is treated: the cultural divide between fiction and non-fiction ends up enforced by professional reviews here, with *Consider the Lobster*, for example, associated only with its essayistic predecessor, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*. Remarkably, Wallace’s postmodernity, and particularly his innovations as a stylist, are treated differently depending on genre. According to the critics, his essays and dispatches to magazines like *Harper’s* set him apart, but his fiction draws him into comparison with Pynchon, Barth, and the rest.

When Wallace is considered in the context of his contemporaries, his work is still anchored to postmodern mainstays. In the small subnet to the left of *Infinite Jest* in Figure 19, reviewers engage younger writers but keep Pynchon and DeLillo’s own most recent encyclopedic novels to hand: *Against the Day* and *Underworld*. Those other texts that are referenced bridge the gulf between “difficult” writing of the
Pynchonian variety and more conventional literature: Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, and Neal Stephenson’s *Cryptonomicon*. This subnet also depends on the comments of single reviewer, and it’s worth considering the retrospective Lev Grossman delivered in *Time* more closely:

> [I]t might be just as appropriate to deliver a eulogy for *Infinite Jest*—not to praise it but to bury it. After all, it did not win (nor was it a runner-up for) the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize or any other major award. It was hailed as the Novel of the Future, and in fact it kicked off a temporary revival of the maxi-novel, books like *Cryptonomicon* and *The Corrections* and *Underworld* and *White Teeth*. For a moment there, it felt as though novels simply had to get longer and longer to encompass the world’s galloping complexity and interconnectedness. Then the fad faded. Now Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* (1,085 pages) just seems self-indulgent and stuntish. (Grossman)

This small moment of critical action reveals both the power and the increasingly obvious limits of professional criticism. Grossman employs the list, that most artful and flexible tool for refining distinctions, and he uses it here to tar a major swath of fiction with the same brush. All of these authors are lumped together as “maxi-novel” acolytes trying to recapture the buzz of the ultimately unsuccessful *Infinite Jest*. The charge both draws these novels together in the reader’s mind and establishes a chain of fading distinction: *Infinite Jest* inspired imitations, the worst of which is *Against the Day*. Of course my methodology ignores the leap Grossman makes in implying that
Underworld and White Teeth were somehow causally connected to Infinite Jest, but I would argue this bug is also a feature: as consumers of criticism, we are trained to accept professional comparisons as valid whether or not they are positive (or legitimated). They form a contextual background, just as the first novels a reviewer chooses to lump together in one analysis develop a mutual bond. Through paragraphs like the Tribune review and the one above, new subnets are born in the history of literary reception.

The larger diagram shows what we already know as literary consumers ourselves: Wallace’s books continue to lead active social lives in spite of Grossman and other professional criticism. The most important part of a book review is usually not the critic’s final verdict but the context and cultural logic used to get there, the work that Grossman shows here to prove his point about the “maxi-novel.” The title of the piece and its hook as a 10th anniversary retrospective overshadow Grossman’s argument. These professional reviews also come with limited shelf lives—the following week, Time’s book review slots were filled by other authors, and Grossman’s status as a reviewer depends not on perfect judgment but consistency and timeliness. While few people will ever read his review again, except, ironically, as a blurb on a book jacket, thousands might continue to browse consumer reviews of Infinite Jest on Amazon, where the cultural logic of relevance is not ordered by temporality but by community.

This is another version of what Guillory calls the “synecdochic list which is the syllabus”—whether the syllabus positions two texts as antagonistic or complementary, they are nevertheless situated within the same cultural frame (Cultural Capital 34).
Wallace is Integral

At first glance, the same methodology of collocated nodes seems to have created a very similar network map for consumer reviews of Wallace’s work on Amazon (Figure 20; once again, only books mentioned at least twice are shown). We see many of the same postmodern texts, but where the professional critics clearly peg Wallace as an acolyte in dialog with Pynchon, Barth, and DeLillo, his everyday readers are much more expansive with their comparisons, bringing *Ulysses*, *Moby Dick*, and even *Les Miserables* into the conversation. A wider canonical lens that compares Wallace’s texts to what we might call Great Books or familiar literary touchstones supersedes those encyclopedic novels from the 1960s to the 1980s. At the same time, Wallace’s distinction from his contemporaries is even more pronounced here, suggesting once again that readers see him more in the context of canonical American literature and less in light of his generational peers. This diagram reflects the extent to which Wallace inspired his readers to integrate his work into their literary lives, encouraging them to think of him not as a Generation X writer but as an aspiring member of a timeless cadre.
In prestige terms Wallace plays a much more prominent role, in part because of the strong links among his own books. In Figure 20, two of the top four nodes in the network were by other authors (by decreasing prestige rank: *Infinite Jest*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *The Broom of the System*, *The Recognitions*), and they were all novels. Amazon reviewers, by contrast, are much more interested in Wallace (their top four: *Infinite Jest*, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *The Broom of the System*). Even though consumer reviews are much more closely tied to their subjects via paratext (the surrounding Amazon layouts are always intended to draw the eye back to the book title and cover image), their authors mention Wallace’s books far more often than professional reviewers did. This reinforces the evidence we saw in Amazon recommendations—Wallace leads on to more Wallace for most readers—but this network is distinct from both the purchase-driven recommendation network, where Wallace was a very distinct subnet, and the professional review network, where he mingled with the postmodernists. There is a balance here between a strong affinity to Wallace in his own right and a diverse contextual network suggesting that readers are working to interpret him on a broader plane. More adventurous than professional critics, these readers cross genre boundaries and compare his fiction and non-fiction alike to an idiosyncratic constellation of literature, drawing together a group of writers who generally share Wallace’s concern with capturing the fragmentary nature of contemporary human experience.

As we have already seen, books are associated together in reviews for many reasons. Using some excerpts from Amazon reviews to support my case, I argue here
that Wallace establishes a particular kind of challenge-based relationship with many of his readers. The data bears out the dual inflections of integral that I began with: the advancement of individual consciousness and the formation of a social or group affinity. The productive difficulty that Wallace creates for his readers has its roots in the postmodern, but everyday readers interpret it as a form of realism instead of a literary exercise, taking his style as a window onto the contemporary. His work is “integral,” then, because it presents conflicting, non-linear narratives and then asks readers to stitch those elements into a multidimensional whole. As one reviewer puts it:

I for one like the fact that he doesn’t feel the need to spell everything out for the reader and makes one mull over his story and possibly even go back and piece together little fragments of seemingly inconsequential lines of dialogue and ambiguous scenes…I for one like things that remind me that I have a brain and force me to exercise this wonderful organ. Infinite Jest is quite a workout for the brain indeed.

(Dr. Gonzo)

For some readers, Wallace’s influence on the brain offers an explicit stance against the kind of interpretation practiced by the professionals: “Ignore the literary critics and meta-reviews—just indulge in this dystopian world of tennis, drugs, and television that shines the harsh light on how ridiculous we all are. Your brain will expand and your heart will open to the world—it's that kind of a book” (sternj). Amazon reviewers discuss individual experiences, but they are also addressing a very specific audience, a
community that has formed around Wallace’s work and is distinctly amateur, not caught up in the professional literary game.

This network reveals how Wallace’s readers pursue the “workout for the brain,” how they exhort each other and, at times, explicitly seek to inform one another’s reading. “[Wallace’s] concerns are political, spiritual, cultural, and—to me, at least—deeply personal...like *Ulysses* [*Infinite Jest*] becomes more accessible, touching, and funny as you grow accustomed to it” (“The Greatest American Novel”). Reviewers frequently draw in other canonical texts either to establish a literary connection with their peers or to mark his inferiority with a familiar yardstick. The best argument for this integral impulse is the way in which Wallace’s Amazon readers consistently connect his work, particularly *Infinite Jest*, to *Hamlet*. Linking Hal Incandenza to another young prince who has lost his father, readers highlight Wallace’s metaphysical, epistemological, and canonical aspirations as an artist, his desire to interpret the burdens of mortality with an intense focus on language.

Consider this reading narrative:

Then, as I sat looking dully at the last page of the book, it occurred [sic] to me. This is the last page, but not the end of the story. I had read the story's conclusion a month before, when I first began reading the book. So I went back and started reading again, and my jaw dropped open in awe of the true genius of this book. Sentences that had seemed insignificant or inconsequential when I first began reading were infused with new meaning, providing me with the conclusion to the story,
This reviewer shares a personal integrative experience, and in doing so offers that experience to others, glossing *Infinite Jest*’s title and explaining his own path to discovering “the true genius of this book.”

*Hamlet* haunts *Infinite Jest* from its title to its anti-heroes, but is rarely mentioned by credentialed book reviewers, for whom it is a relatively superficial feature of a complex novel with inconclusive plots set in a bizarre near-future world, all of which need to be described and contextualized with the book’s postmodern antecedents. Everyday readers, however, put *Hamlet* into service as a narratological skeleton key that promises to unlock a basic structure and purpose to *Infinite Jest*’s disjointed storylines: “Modern (post-modern) Hamlet. In structure as well as theme” (Gimpel the Fool). Readers identify Wallace’s references to the play, quoting the “infinite jest” line, identifying Hal’s debt to Hamlet and at times making sophisticated arguments about the two: “We are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe.’ That dangling Hamlet-like doubt—that ‘maybe’—calls into question not the quest but its effects—the consequences of surrendering oneself, of being swept away that await the wandering souls at the end of their journey” (Marfin).

Interpretations like these are generative, producing a genuine literary dialog among reviewers as they do the “work,” integrating Wallace into a community and establishing boundaries and classifications of distinction. As both a subtext in need of glossing and a literary comparison, *Hamlet* works as an intertextual space that allows Wallace readers to create new forms of conversation. Another *Infinite Jest* reviewer,
Jake Wilson, adopts a more pedagogical route, the kind of opening one might imagine in a college lecture: “In the opening two words of Shakespeare's Hamlet (from which Infinite Jest derives its title) Bernardo cries Who’s there? having seen the ghost of a tragedy; and Wallace answers in the first two words of this epic novel—I am” (Wilson). Wilson moves from this instructive tone into a gradually more intimate voice, closing with “Rest In Peace, DFW—you accomplished more with this one book than most writers ever even imagine.” The line is both more poignant and commercial because of Wilson’s sign-off in the review, where he offers a link to his own self-published novel. Effectively, Wilson has turned the review into a dialog with both the Shakespearean past and the literary present, creating a particular kind of public intimacy in the process as he contributes to a wider Infinite Jest conversation and builds his own literary link to Wallace.

These readers often embrace the emotional side of this interpretive work in ways that critics never would, and in doing so become characters themselves at the heart of critical comparisons: “It's not that I dislike long or annotated books (I’d just finished the Northwestern University’s heavily annotated Moby Dick and loved it!), but this almost pointless tome pained me to read in a way not felt since being assigned The Yearling in school” (“The Fine Line Between Genius and Inanity (Sic.).”). Wallace is academic in a bad way, reminding the reader of a hated school assignment, yet the review hastens to assure us that Infinite Jest’s obviously learned qualities—its length and intimidating footnotes—did not color the decision. Wallace’s novel is ranked against Melville’s and found wanting, but like Time’s Grossman, the reviewer still places them on the same list, and in both cases the reader is confronted with the
fact of the comparison as well as its tone. A parenthetical reference establishes Wallace’s categorical link to Melville and the perceived difference between the two, once again literally, grammatically writing the reader into the critical act of distinction. This reviewer closes on another intensely personal note: “One Amazon.com reviewer mentioned breaking Wallace's legs. That seems an extreme [sic] and somewhat excessive exercise. I would limit my ministrations to his writing hand.”

Such deep involvement becomes familiar, a kind of cliché:

It’s like reading Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. If you are a serious contemporary/postmodern/whatever reader or writer you must read it. Whatever time it takes. Homework. Don’t skip the footnotes. You will not regret it. You’ll laugh/cry/it will become you/etc. *Infinite Jest* is the book I recommend when I am talking to people who REALLY READ BOOKS” (Roberti).

Here the integral, educational impulse is met head-on: “Homework. Don’t skip the footnotes.” The breezy slash-concatenated lists belie the earnest imperatives of the review and its elevation of Wallace into a pantheon of encyclopedic novelists. Once again the reviewer is in the middle of the process of integration, calling on others to join the ranks of those who “REALLY READ BOOKS.” The lines of reference connecting books in Figure 3 exemplify this process of public criticism as it has played out over hundreds of Amazon reviews. In a very real sense, it shows the work
of everyday readers as they interpret Wallace and pull him into contact with a popular literary sphere.

I’d like to close by recasting my definition of integral. Over four hundred readers have found *Infinite Jest* sufficiently energizing to write a review of the novel on Amazon, and their verdict emphatically positions the book in a transhistorical American context encompassing postmodernism and expanding beyond it, considering Wallace as stylist, crafter of literary puzzles, and “genius.” The work of reading and reviewing inspires many readers to cultivate new kinds of awareness and to share it with a community of fellow readers. In the end, the strange canon that they construct around Wallace, from Victor Hugo to Joseph Heller, is a testament to his success. To call Wallace’s fiction “integral” only makes sense in the context of this public readership which performs the actual work of building his infinite jests into a wider system of cultural meaning. This is the leap that so concerned Wallace himself, the transition from individual to group, from monad to collective, not just in the abstract but in his particular case as a writer and a human being. In this third sense of integrating David Foster Wallace into the world, his literature has largely been a success. His self-questioning entertainments demand challenging acts of reading and interpretation, but they also lead readers to consider the boundaries of personal agency, perception, and mediation that define our cultural landscape.

As the argument above has shown, Wallace occupies a unique position in contemporary literature. His is a distinct literary brand, a different author whose style

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52 Wallace approaches this claim explicitly in *The Pale King* when he claims “the various ways some of the forthcoming §§ have had to be distorted, depersonalized, polyphonized, or otherwise jazzed up…[have] ended up being integral to the book’s whole project” (*The Pale King* 72).
and quirkiness quickly set him apart from his peers in the marketplace. His writing earned critical acclaim for the skill with which he engaged the *postmodern*, though his success among professional reviewers proved only a part of the enthusiastic popular reception that spawned groups like Infinite Summer. He was *integral* in three ways, encouraging his readers to reconstruct the real through his fragmentary prose, getting them to share that experience collectively, and making his own integral leap, leading readers to feel they have “spen[t] time inside his beautiful poetry of a brain” (sternj). These three keywords are all ultimately questions of style, and Wallace was unflagging in his efforts to make his writing a transparent reflection of the perceived contemporary. Wallace is special for this, for his unflinching efforts to address the loneliness of mediation. His fiction lays bare the philosophical foundations of cultural attention, encouraging his audience to rethink their most basic literary acts: reading, contextualizing, enjoying, and judging. As we practice these exercises for the reader on his own body of work, we define new forms of literary culture that amplify and consecrate the voice of the audience. Each review and rating is an act of collective critical trust and another shared experience in which we, and Wallace, become ourselves.
Revenge of the Nerd: Junot Díaz’s Reverse Colonization of the American Imagination

Junot Díaz has had one of the most explosive arrivals on the U.S. literary scene in recent history, earning major accolades for his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, most notably the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Three years after its publication in 2008 it remains at the top of Amazon's bestseller list for the “Hispanic American Literature & Fiction” category and is well on its way to central canonical status. As many reviewers noted, the book announced the arrival of a confident, singular literary talent on the national stage. But Díaz was aligned for greatness long before he completed the scintillating *Oscar Wao*: the list of fellowships and accomplishments includes a Guggenheim award in 1999, an NEA grant in 2003 and a Harvard fellowship. An incredible dynamism clearly defines Díaz's life as it does his fiction, and his swift elevation is only the most public accomplishment of a sustained and ambitious literary career. Ironically, Díaz has achieved this success while producing a rather limited body of work: one collection of short stories and a single novel from 1996 to 2011, along with some short stories published mostly in *The New Yorker*.

We can draw two observations from this meteoric rise to fame on the basis of two books. First, Díaz has earned accolades primarily for his style. The “galvanic” prose of *Oscar Wao* makes Díaz a fascinating study in the making of literary fame precisely because his work traverses “tropical magic realism, punk-rock feminism, hip-hop machismo, post-postmodern pyrotechnics and enough polymorphous
multiculturalism to fill up an Introduction to Cultural Studies syllabus,” to quote two of the novel’s reviews from *The New York Times* (Scott; Kakutani). This sort of maximalism, complete with footnotes, echoes David Foster Wallace’s sprawling fictional monuments, but it also pushes the principle of expansive, integral literature of consciousness that Wallace championed in a new direction, bringing it into dialog with Latin American magical realism and the more soberly political arena of Latino/a Chicano/a fiction and the class and ethnic tensions of immigration narratives. Where Wallace dedicated lengthy notes in *Infinite Jest* to the minutiae of manufactured consumer reality, particularly pharmaceuticals, *Oscar Wao* applies the same treatment to the (for a mainstream American audience) missing history of the Dominican Republic’s bloody colonial and dictatorial history. In essence, Díaz adapts the American strain of the maximalist novel from its original project of synthesizing the individual consumer experience to the hemispheric political project of reconnecting American and Caribbean history.

Díaz’s maximalist fiction implies certain facts about its author—his obsessive attention to detail, his credentials as a dedicated fan of science fiction, comic books and other pulp esoterica, his intention to convey the full darkness of Latin American history and the psychological impact of *fukú*—that place him squarely in the “loose and baggy monsters” American maximalist mode, from Pynchon and Barth to Ellis and DeLillo. Yet where these writers have all established authorial presences with a deluge of lengthy novels, Díaz is reticent. His career, whether intentionally or not, creates a certain form of artistic scarcity that, as Ted Striphas argues in another context, “takes work to produce” (*The Late Age of Print* 157). Striphas discussed
scarcity in the very different sphere of *Harry Potter* production—the globally enforced release dates that became press stories of their own as millions of books were distributed under heavy security for the final volumes in J. K. Rowling’s hit series. For Díaz, the narrative of scarcity has become central to his persona: consider the emphasis both Díaz and his interviewers have placed on the sheer effort involved in producing *Oscar Wao*. Alongside their discussion of the “phenomenon” that is the novel itself, these interlocutors repeatedly return to the metanarrative of Díaz’s arduous path to success and the despair he felt in the middle of his decade-long struggle with the manuscript of his novel.\(^{53}\)

My intention here is not to make Díaz seem like a media manipulator or in any way to imply that his writer’s block was anything less than genuine. But this is the narrative that the literary cultural sphere has chosen to write about him, and the choice is instructive, falling neatly as it does into a very long tradition of hardworking immigrant narratives. As professional reviewers struggle to convey the complexity of multicultural registers which Díaz deploys in his prose, they have found something familiar to build on: the ghetto kid made good.

These two observations, Díaz’s inspired mixture of genres and cultural registers on the one hand and the celebrated metanarrative of his own challenging path from poverty to professoriate, ultimately make *Oscar Wao* a product on the cutting edge of self-aware literary consumption. Díaz himself is clearly wary of the hazards of

\(^{53}\) As Díaz described the ordeal to readers of *O*, the *Oprah* magazine: “By the end of that fifth year, perhaps in an attempt to save myself, to escape my despair, I started becoming convinced that I had written all I had to write, that I was a minor league Ralph Ellison, a Pop Warner Edward Rivera, that maybe it was time, for the sake of my mental health, for me to move on to another profession” (Díaz, “Becoming a Writer”).
commercial success and ambivalent about literary fame, just as Wallace was when he was being lauded as a new phenomenon. But more importantly *Oscar Wao* has been contextualized primarily as a literary phenomenon, a blockbuster, anchored by but rapidly eclipsing its *bona fides* as an ethnic identity text. In the networks we will explore below readers and critics position Díaz as a hard-working literary celebrity, a prize-winner and best-seller, more consistently than they describe him as the writer at the top of the “Hispanic American Literature & Fiction” chart.

**Negocios: The Literary Marketplace**

Where established authors have clearly defined canonical positions (Toni Morrison and Thomas Pynchon, for example), Díaz is an authorial signifier whose meaning is still being negotiated by arbiters from all corners of the literary universe. Exploring Díaz's presence in the literary marketplace reveals a complicated authorial identity—while the fact of his fame is universally acknowledged, it has thus far resisted easy categorization. In the two years since its publication, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has already appeared on hundreds of college and high school syllabi.54 Yet Díaz continues to hold a fluctuating position in networks of literary prestige as groups of readers contextualize him in various ways. The literary marketplace is the most active and hotly contested zone of cultural distinction, capturing both the influence of other, less commercial forms of critical elevation (book reviews, best books of the decade lists, etc) and the direct impact of school reading

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54 This rough measure of prominence can easily be verified by conducting a Google search of the book’s title and the word “syllabus” limited to .edu domain names. A search on December 3, 2010 turned up over 1000 hits, with the great majority appearing to be actual syllabi.
assignments. By tracing Díaz’s presence through Amazon’s “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought” as those networks have shifted across a period of time allows us to identify several of the competing forces a swell as to make out a persistent sense of his cultural presence. Figures 4-8 represent those texts recommended from the Amazon page of *Oscar Wao* at four roughly monthly intervals from December 2010 to March 2011, with Figure 9 combining the data into a holistic view of persistent nodes.

In early December Díaz appears in the context of mainstream commercial success, surrounded by novels that straddle the middlebrow zone between critical acclaim and mass popularity like *White Teeth*, *The Road*, *Olive Kittredge* and *The Known World*(). One axis of distinction at work here is clearly the Pulitzer: *Tinkers* won the prize in 2010, as did every other text I have just mentioned. Where the networks of more established authors often present multiple valences of influence (Oprah's Book Club selections, genre connections and biographical affiliations, for example), Díaz is being read here primarily in the context of the Pulitzer, his major achievement to date. I will speculate (briefly) that we see the holiday shopping season at work here and the release of major lists such as the *New York Times* “Best Books of the Year.” *Oscar Wao* spent far more time on the bestseller lists in paperback than it did in hardcover, and its status as a significant book of the decade was clearly being cemented in editorial offices around the country. The gift-giving season also signals prime advertising, and I have heard anecdotally that publishers “buy” recommendations on Amazon just as they can rent display cases and sales areas at brick and mortar stores. The feedback loop of advertising and customer desire plays a major role here, in this case highlighting those texts with the prestigious gold stickers
that embody prize capital. Speculation aside, this commercialism also a piece of evidence: Díaz is on a rare plane of the publishing world here, among books that are expected to sell hundreds of thousands of copies. While we might draw a number of these texts together around the rubric of natives and homelands, we can only encompass all of them by calling them prize-winners, list-makers, blockbusters.

Figure 21: Amazon Recommendations, Díaz, Early December 2010

By the end of December, this newly commercial position has begun a shift into something else: another Pulitzer-winner, Michael Chabon, appears in the network and the Latino/a classics *Dreaming in Cuban* and *In the Time of the Butterflies* are linked in *Oscar Wao*’s first-order subnet (Figure 22). These, along with the Spanish-language edition of *Oscar Wao*, clearly align Díaz with a particular genre, once again placing him back in the zone of “Hispanic & Latin American Fiction.” Nevertheless, he
remains a literary gateway from this genre of ethnic literature to the canon of mainstream prize-winners. Díaz’s academic audience also makes itself known here with another critical text on migration issues linked to *Oscar Wao*. These shifting networks mark out the ways in which different constituencies, responding to different elements of Díaz’s fiction, vie for cultural dominance in contextualizing his work. After the blockbuster profile of the early December network, Díaz begins to evolve a new context both more nuanced and more prestigious than what we have seen so far.

Figure 22: Amazon Recommendations, Díaz, Late December 2010

In January and February of 2011, Díaz readers begin to integrate him into a higher plane of canonical American literature, superseding the genre barrier to align
him with Allen Ginsberg and Robert Haas, and later linking him to established major novelists Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo (Figure 23, Figure 24). At the same time, he is, like Morrison before him, helping to transform a loosely defined genre into a clearly demarcated space of literary study. The anthology *Latino Boom* does not excerpt Díaz directly, but Amazon claims it is frequently bought together with both *Oscar Wao* and *Dreaming in Cuban*, and it is not difficult to imagine the literature classes currently being taught around those three texts. The simultaneous emergence of professional anthologies and affiliation with established canonical titans like Morrison and DeLillo also mark an inversion point for Díaz where his work is no longer in need of illustration and explanation, but can now be used to reinterpret established canons.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 23: Amazon Recommendations, Díaz, Late January 2011*
Figure 24: Amazon Recommendations, Díaz, Early March 2011

If these observations represent the changing face of Díaz’s position in the literary marketplace, we can glimpse the substructure or foundations of that fame when we limit our network only to explore links that have persisted across several monthly snapshots. Figure 25 offers a completely different view of Díaz’s fame, identifying him as a peripheral member of a Latin Caribbean literary community dominated by Cristina García, Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros and and Esmerelda Santiago. These sustained links mark Díaz squarely within an ethnic tradition of writing dominated by the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Puerto Rico. Just as striking is the extent to which this particular sub-genre is dominated by women writers. When Díaz is compared to other “big, ambitious novel” writers, the list is almost entirely male, but here the market tells a different story, placing Díaz on the edge of a subnet of immigration narratives penned by women and dominated by female protagonists.
While Díaz might be culturally celebrated for his innovative style and his “nerd” credentials and esoteric references, in the market he is still defined primarily by genre, and Latin American immigration narratives are epitomized by strong women anchoring their struggling families, just as Oscar Wao is through Oscar’s mother and sister.

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**Figure 25: Persistent Recommendations, Díaz, December 2010 – March 2011**

Edwidge Danticat is the only other young writer in this persistent recommendation network, and her affiliation with Díaz here marks their collective ascension to the top of this particular sub-genre. In the monthly sample networks described above, Danticat and Díaz are up-and-comers who have delved unflinchingly into Hispaniola’s dark political past, branching out as a result from the Caribbean literary zone through mainstream recognition (Danticat’s first book was an Oprah pick four years after publication) and their status as promising young writers of color affiliated with the New Yorker. Her position in the persistent link network is even more limited than Díaz’s, held together only by a mutual tie to Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Yet Danticat fulfills another kind of immigrant ideal,
producing a steady stream of novels, short stories and political essays, taking strong public stances and addressing the politics not just of Haitian oppression but women’s rights and racism both there and in the U.S.. In the larger network of persistent texts (unrestricted to those within three links of *Oscar Wao*), cluster analysis reveals the largest groupings (where nodes must share four links within the cluster) to have just three components. Danticat has her own tightly interconnected subnet of texts, while Díaz, shares a cluster with his Latino/a literary predecessors, Christina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* and Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets*. Only one other author’s work clumps together with the same consistency as Danticat: Toni Morrison. Like Díaz, Danticat reacts against established literary fields and social structures in her writing, but where he seeks to break out of these systems entirely, she, like Morrison, instead defines a kind of genre through her work. The clustering of Díaz, Alvarez and Thomas suggest that Díaz has been contextualized as bridging the camps of Latino/a immigrant fiction (Alvarez) and “ghetto fiction” (Thomas). In the following sections we will see how differently mainstream readers perceive his work outside in less commercial contexts.

“*Across and Back*”: Professional Reviewers

If the commercial status of Díaz’s work continues to shift between the registers of big ambitious novels, Latin American fiction, *New Yorker* elect and pop culture fandom, his various readerships present him in a different light when the question of context is no longer framed through book shopping. In the network of authors and
texts mentioned at least twice in Díaz’s professional book reviews, the author of *Oscar Wao* is contextualized through multiple registers (Figure 26). After Díaz himself and his two books, the most highly connected node in the network is Rafael Trujillo, marking the significance of *Oscar Wao*’s engagement with Dominican history. Díaz would no doubt be pleased to learn that the “Dictatingest Dictator” whose malevolence overshadows his novel is also haunting his reviews very effectively as critics situate *Oscar Wao* within a larger post-imperial Caribbean context (*Oscar Wao* 80). The larger network bears out this point, freighted as it is with nodes like Tolkien and *Dune*. Unlike David Foster Wallace, whose own complex arrangements of cultural references were described rather than explained, Díaz’s footnotes and allusions are extensively unpacked in his reviews to introduce readers to this strange new beast, the nerdy immigration narrative (to which we will return below). Díaz himself is an author who needs explaining before readers can be told about his work—the Oscar Wilde node here reflects Díaz’s story, repeated by several reviewers, about the mispronunciation of “Wilde” in Spanish and the easy segue it offers for describing the author’s transnational, bilingual work.
Yet in many ways, Díaz’s fiction is much more polylingual and multicultural than it is merely a combination of English and Spanish. The diversity of references indicates a lack of consensus among professional reviewers. As a Dominican American, Díaz falls easily into the Caribbean and Latin American space of Walcott, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Francisco Goldman and Mario Vargas Llosa. As a writer describing oppression and ethnic tension, his work aligns with Zora Neale Hurston,
Toni Morrison and Philip Roth. Yet he is also firmly linked to popular culture, from Tolkien to Stephen King, and many of the single-instance references not shown here trace those connections, from Sauron and Mordor to *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*. The presence of Dickens in the diagram brings particular nuances to Díaz’s role as a literary protestor and political activist. Consider this review of *Drown* in the *Los Angeles Times*:

> Until the passing of time lifts the new immigrants as it once lifted the old ones—it is not clear that our society remains resilient enough for this to happen—it is the artists who offer most of us the only way across and back. It took Dickens to arouse the Victorians to an awareness of the horrors below; it may be only a Diaz\(^{55}\) and his fellow writers who can arouse our imaginations, at least. (Eder)

Here the class and ethnic tensions of Díaz’s narratives are made explicit, even stark, through comparison to Dicken’s reform-minded novels. This almost lustful exposure of a cultural underbelly is, it seems, just what we mainstream American readers need—the challenges of immigration and (with *Oscar Wao*) political repression brought to life in fiction.

This review presages that element of critical reaction to *Oscar Wao* which marveled at Díaz’s particularly American cultural fluency—his comic book knowledge, his literary references, his sitcom allusions—which served to persistently yank the narrative out of the ethnic literature groove and into the cultural mainstream, to remind readers that these dramas were playing out not in some stylized America but

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\(^{55}\) [Sic]. The politics of diacriticals and the growing acceptance of “í” in professional criticism will be addressed below.
the same landscape we inhabited already. This role, with the artist working as a bridge between white American cultural consciousness and the immigrant experience, was of course exactly what Díaz set out to accomplish. As he explained it in a 2007 interview,

I think there was sort of this constant poetic in the book where I was trying to imprint the real with the crazy, or contaminate the real with all this nerdy narrative, and then the same way just doing the exact reverse—contaminating the nerdy with the painfully real. There’s nothing that historians and serious academics dislike more than someone drawing a flip analogy with a figure from popular culture, but by the same token what’s fascinating is how much fanboys and consumers of what we’ll call “nerd culture” resist any infection by the real. Fanboys will go out of their way, they’ll bend over backwards to swear to God that J.R.R. Tolkien has no racist elements, which is hilarious. In some ways I’m equally committed to both cultures, but I’m an artist, so try to avoid being too much of a partisan…I think each of them have an extremely strong blind spot and that neither proved entirely satisfactory to me as an author or to me as a human being. I feel like I had to lay down ten or eleven or twelve different sheets of acetate for the little hole in my eye; the blind spot became less and less and less. (Zaurino)

56 For some critics in the Latino/a critical community, the way that Díaz and other younger Latino/a writers engage with mainstream culture brings their own ethnic authenticity into question, though as this chapter will argue, his linguistic politics are far more complicated. For an overview, see Sáez and Dallego (73-105).
The diversity of authors and texts at play in Figure 26 is another such instance of laying acetate as critics work to convey the complexity of Díaz’s stance, his position across and against established genres, through the very language of genre itself.

*Middle Earth: Between Trujillo, America and Fantasy in Amazon Reviews*

This process of literary reverse colonization, of deliberately contaminating the language of one discourse with the icons of another, has drawn a complex and polyvocal readership around *Oscar Wao* and Díaz’s work as a whole, and the author’s metaphor of patching the gaps in his own perception is particularly apt for the hermeneutics at work as non-professional readers continue to position Díaz within larger networks of literary fame. When we use the same methodological lens to explore collocations in Amazon reviews (Figure 27), it is immediately obvious that the most prominent nodes in both networks are identical. Like professional critics, “real” readers respond to the dark history at the heart of Díaz’s work, making Trujillo an even more central node in the network than Díaz’s first book, *Drown*. The centrality of Trujillo in both networks is, I believe, a testament to Díaz’s complete success in this narrative gambit. By personifying history so pointedly in this character and adapting a distinctly American cultural mythos to convey that history, he not only earned accolades but achieved the rare accomplishment of eliciting the same reaction across the board, from both professional and non-professional readers. The Trujillo we see at

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57 For all its similarity to the professional criticism, however, the Amazon reviews are much more diverse in their references. For the sake of legibility this image has been filtered to include only nodes with at least two connections to the central subnet visible here—without this limit, this visible graph would have been ringed with another layer of nodes with just one or no connections at all to the core, many of them unique to Amazon readers.
the center of this network is the figure Díaz describes in his first footnote for *Oscar Wao*, establishing this postmodern literary device as a vehicle for subaltern history, rage and cultural reference all at once:

At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured, or, I would argue, imagined. He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. (*Oscar Wao* FN 1, p. 2)

The escalating rhetoric of Díaz’s footnote is hilarious and sad at the same time, presenting the anger of the Dominican people in the slightly bemused and jaded tone of a partisan scholar scoring points in, of course, a footnote. At the same time, the way in which the narrator ups the referential ante tells us more about Díaz’s reception: Sauron, arch-villain of the *Lord of the Rings*, is a connection that every reader makes, as we have seen. Arawn and Darkseid, of *The Chronicles of Prydain* and the DC Comics universe, are invisible in both professional and Amazon reviews, except where this mesmeric passage is quoted itself.
Figure 27: People and Title Collocations in Amazon Reviews
If we look at the center of Figure 27 as a series of triangles, we can see Díaz’s game of cultural stacking, the layers of acetate reference, as they are unfolded and interpreted by readers. The central, expected triangle is between Díaz and his two published books. But this core is mirrored and even overshadowed by the triangle Trujillo forms with Díaz and *Oscar Wao*: the dictator actually overwhelms discussion of Díaz in the literary context of his short stories in favor of the history of the Dominican Republic. But this triangle, too, has its reflection in the shape Tolkien makes with Díaz and Trujillo, a cultural echo or inversion that manages to humanize this alien history for American readers and demonize its antagonist in one fell swoop. This narrative doubling and redoubling, which appears so seamlessly in the casual references Díaz works into his novel, becomes its own source of challenging discussion as readers identify its different narrative components.

The racism inherent in Middle Earth is a metaphor Díaz does not employ so much as he reverse-colonizes it, suggesting that the cherished fantasy series confronts the same dark impulses that overshadow Dominican history and the lives of immigrants in the United States today. Shadows and darkness—these are the terms that Díaz seeks to trouble for us across the cultural landscape of four-color archvillains. Trujillo, that “portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin” is a figure from the same troubled color zone as these imagined enemies; the forces of evil we have so carefully illustrated as unreal are still manifestations of real fears, hatreds and bigotries (Díaz, *Oscar Wao* FN 1, p. 2). The central presence of the Trujillo node in both professional and Amazon reviews proves that this bit of literary *fukú* is eminently successful. One reader even likened Díaz’s use of untranslated
Spanish to Tolkien’s use of Elvish in his novels: “In a way, this technique reminded me of Tolkien, who employed passages of untranslated Elvish in his own fiction. It helps to create a mood, a feeling of verisimilitude (overused as that word is), a depth. It really invites you into the inner lives of this Dominican family” (Fisher).

I will return to this loaded comparison below, but for now let us focus on how warmly other readers received Díaz’s invitation to read his work in the context of popular culture. Indeed a whole segment of the fan population is drawn to Díaz through the magic of that Tolkien triangle, recognizing him as one of their own. One tongue-in-cheek writer suggested that Díaz had given him the perfect snapshot of Dominican culture, explained in terms he could understand. “It is easy to keep track of how badly characters are hurt because their mental and physical injuries are often expressed in terms of hit points—perfect for those of us who understand how similar life is to the terms laid out in the Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook” (Fogle). The connection to Dungeons & Dragons is particularly significant since it links Oscar Wao to a performative, collective form of narrative. Just as when players gather around a table and transform die rolls and paper notes into an act of collective imagination, Díaz calls on his readers to reinterpret a literally “alien” narrative through uniquely American touchstones, to use their well-developed faculties of the fantastic to conjure up the discomfiting real.

At the same time, these “real” readers also interpret Díaz in a decidedly literary cultural frame: canonical benchmark writers like Toni Morrison share the stage with more recent contemporaries like Dave Eggers and Julia Alvarez. When we focus on the connections between authors, it quickly becomes clear that the cultural field is
divided into writers who are associated with Díaz and Trujillo or with the author alone. The Trujillo group, spread out below the central cluster, suggests a particular kind of historical fiction, primarily Latin American, that addresses political oppression in particular (and in Llosa’s case, Trujillo’s regime itself). This historical context can also be read as subtext for Díaz’s American audience, where the real narrative operates in the literary space mapped out above the central triangles of Díaz, Trujillo and Tolkien. Here Díaz is contextualized with prominent contemporaries, including David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and Michael Chabon, and a group of canonical authors who are linked only to Díaz himself: Hemingway, Carver, Joyce and McCarthy. Noticeably absent are Díaz’s real contemporaries, the writers he interacts with in the pages of the *New Yorker* and at literary events, especially Edwidge Danticat, with whom he has shared the stage in any number of panels, interviews and readings. In fact, the non-Trujillo network is almost entirely white, with Toni Morrison the sole exception to what Díaz once called “The Unthinking White Reflex” in cultural distinction (Díaz, “Mil Máscaras”).

The series of the triangles in the center of this graph marks off two territories, serving as “the pivot along which the culture swings” in the world literary system of commodifying authentic ethnicity. Below the triangles, a small subnet of Latin American historical fiction links Díaz and Trujillo to a cultural tradition of political

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58 The outlier, Nabokov, appears based on two reviews: one extensive list of canonical writers whose status Díaz has now earned, and a second review opining that Díaz’s nerdish references, like Nabokov’s *Lepidoptera*, are details unnecessary to readerly enjoyment. He is also, of course, a writer for whom English was a political choice.

59 (Díaz, “Mil Máscaras”). As Sarah Brouillette argues in her excellent study, “several things characterize the postcolonial literature that achieves the greatest success in the current market: it is English-language fiction; it is relatively 'sophisticated' or 'complex' and often anti-realist; it is politically liberal and suspicious of nationalism; it uses a language of exile, hybridity, and 'mongrel' subjectivity” (61).
protest and remembrance, and more specifically to the expressions of that tradition geared towards a broadly international audience. After all, unlike Márquez and Llosa, Díaz writes in English for a specifically American audience. And these are the readers who create another literary space for Díaz, the one anchored by Tolkien and ranging from *Star Wars* and *Watchmen* to Morrison and Joyce. As one reader described this divide:

If you love any of the great Latin American modernists, or American writers like Chabon, Lethem, Eggers, and the recently departed David Foster Wallace, or if you can imagine a great combination of the two, then this book is for you…Díaz [sic] my man, wherever you are, know that you're the best you are at what you do, and a No-Prize is winging its way to you through the phantom mailways of the Universal Nerd Alliance! (D. Smith)

Here the full cultural territory is laid out. Díaz combines the “great Latin American modernists” and “American writers,” and his transcultural work has earned him a “No-Prize,” an iconic non-award Marvel Comics bestows on readers who successfully identify and rationalize continuity problems in the ever-expanding Marvel Universe. In other words, Díaz brings together the political, historical discourse of Latin America and the innovative energy of the best contemporary (white, male) American writers, uniting them in a literary package that reinterprets both discourses according to the logic of an ironic nerd discourse.
Fanboys and -girls: The Book Nerds of LibraryThing

The final group of readers I’d like to bring into the frame here stands between the diffuse network of Amazon purchase-driven recommendations and the highly intentional acts of contextualization drawn from literary reviews. The website LibraryThing encourages book collectors and aficionados to join a “social reading” community by sharing their libraries, book reviews, local literary events and other reading activities. The gravitational center of the site is the user library, where individuals can itemize, categorize, rate and review their book collections. Each work has its own page, much like on Amazon, but the commercial undertone is largely replaced by a social one: browsers can see which other users have enjoyed a particular book or see what books others have recommended for those who enjoyed a particular title. In effect, this creates a voluntary, non-commercial, user-generated analog to the purchase-driven recommendations on Amazon. True to its social mission, LibraryThing also allows other users to endorse or critique a particular recommendation with a “thumbs up/thumbs down” mechanism, allowing us to measure the strength of positive and negative ties within this network of texts. When we graph this recommendation network, the results are dramatically different from Amazon, in part because of the uneven results of such “crowdsourcing.”

To begin with, this human hive-mind recommendation network is less consistent than Amazon’s algorithms, which typically churn out 80 or more recommendations for each text (which I have consistently limited to the first ten suggestions throughout this project). Here, the number varies, with Oscar Wao attracting fifteen suggestions but the average node in its three-level network garnering
only 2.28. In this sense, the network is already much more representative of social position: instead of an artificial ten out-links per node, an organic mesh emerges where edge counts demonstrate a real form of popularity. Hence measurements of prestige carry even more weight here, based as they are on human intentionality weighted by reader votes for or against particular recommendations. In addition, this network is much more stable, determined not by a constantly fluctuating flow of sales transactions but a much more permanent record of votes left by readers and endorsed by others asynchronously over a period of months or years.

This is not to say that the LibraryThing recommendations are any more definitive or unbiased than Amazon’s, merely that they represent a different space of literary consumption. Where Amazon’s recommendations are presumably influenced by thousands of users and transactions, on LibraryThing only ten different users offered suggestions for *Oscar Wao* (though these suggestions were voted on by a handful of other users). And the LibraryThing group as a whole has its demographic skew, just as our other reading groups do, which become apparent when we look at “prestige” rankings for books in the three-level *Oscar Wao* network (Table 8).
Table 8: Prestige in Díaz LibraryThing Network

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Centrality as % of Highest Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nineteen Eighty-Four</td>
<td>George Orwell</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brave New World</td>
<td>Aldous Huxley</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fahrenheit 451</td>
<td>Ray Bradbury</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Giver</td>
<td>Lois Lowry</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Clockwork Orange</td>
<td>Anthony Burgess</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Handmaid’s Tale</td>
<td>Margaret Atwood</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shadow of the Wind</td>
<td>Carlos Ruiz Zafán</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal Farm</td>
<td>George Orwell</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime and Punishment</td>
<td>Fyodor Dostoevsky</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Master and Margarita</td>
<td>Mikhail Bulgakov</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</td>
<td>Junot Díaz</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between Orwell, Burgess, Bradbury, Lowry and Huxley, a clear dystopian, science fiction bent makes itself evident here. In short, we have entered the realm of the “fanboys,” the American nerd culture that Díaz so deftly adapts to Oscar’s “alien” life in New Jersey. Just as some reviewers of the novel on Amazon found Díaz’s nerdish credentials comforting as they learned about the “foreign” culture of Dominican Americans, here we can see Díaz interpreted through a community that is itself positioned deep in American pop culture territory. LibraryThing appeals to digitally savvy readers, to those who enjoy collecting and cataloging texts as consumer artifacts and find “social reading” to be an appealing idea. There are, of course, all sorts of people on LibraryThing who might not fit the Oscar Wao profile: two of the users who suggested books for Oscar Wao identified themselves as a former art director of a national women’s magazine and a bird conservation researcher and guide. As a group, however, this online community interprets Oscar Wao in a particular way.
Figure 28: First-Order Recommendations for *Oscar Wao*, LibraryThing
The direct connections from *Oscar Wao* (Figure 28) belie the dystopian cast of the broader LibraryThing network. Readers link Díaz to elements of the American popular contemporary canon, including Irving’s *The World According to Garp* and Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. As in the Amazon network, Díaz is also brought into contact with a Latin American subnet including the familiar García Márquez, Llosa and Alvarez. But this network reveals something new, a more intellectual and scholastic focus, in the final additions to that cluster: Laura Restrepo and the textbook *Caribbean Connections: Dominican Republic*. Even New Jersey, the other primary locus of *Oscar Wao*, is mapped out in this network with *The Lost Legends of New Jersey*. The LibraryThing interface even offers a space for users to gloss their recommendations, a feature two of them have taken advantage of on the *Oscar Wao* page. *In the Time of Butterflies* is recommended because “*Oscar Wao* mentions *In the Time of the Butterflies* in a footnote. Both dealing so gracefully with the Trujillo regime, they seem like complementary books” (“The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao”). The textbook is suggested “[t]o learn more about the DR, and for an essay by Junot Díaz.” In both cases, readers are specifically instructing one another in the context of Díaz’s universe, taking his footnotes at educational face value.

Following some of the links from the *Oscar Wao* page quickly reveals that the LibraryThing network is a receptacle for uneven levels of human attention. The *Caribbean Connections* textbook has no reviews or recommendations of its own, and the volunteer-driven network of user recommendations varies dramatically in the number of links offered for a particular book. Nevertheless, the *Oscar Wao* page, an attractor for reader interest, utilizes a number of the site’s other features that can tell us
more about Díaz’s interactions with fan culture. The page offers an extensive, Wikipedia-like entry on the book, including a list of major characters, the endorsement quotes on the book jacket, important places in the text, et cetera. This level of detail goes beyond even what Amazon’s deep pockets will finance for its book pages, and approaches a form of proto-fan culture.60 These links echo the collaborative, productive literary spirit of the website The Annotated Oscar Wao, where users can contribute to a reader’s guide to the novel that offers translations, glosses and links to further reading, much of it on Wikipedia. In interpretive spaces like these, Díaz’s readers can respond to his nerd discourse in kind, celebrating his work as it engages diverse fan universes from The Lord of the Rings to The Fantastic Four.

Hyperwhiteness and the Unintelligible

In the Amazon reviews quoted above, one reader compared Díaz’s use of Spanish to Tolkien’s untranslated Elvish. This point bears a closer look because of the assumptions it reproduces about the intractably alien nature of Oscar Wao’s Dominican family. Díaz’s novel reached millions of readers in the American mainstream, but many still approached it as a kind of science fiction, entertaining and educational in its own right but with little practical application. In 2008, Díaz had yet to earn real recognition from nerds: “‘Fanboys don’t know what to do with a fanboy of color,’ Díaz said, noting that the comic book and sci-fi fan base is still a conservative group. And, to add insult to injury, he’s never been invited to a convention. Not once”

60 For more on the documentary and collaborative impulses in fan culture, see Jason Mittel and Henry Jenkins.
(Saikali). In other words, just as Díaz distances himself from his Dominican origins by choosing to write in English, he has maintained a critical space, a few sheets of acetate, between his own affiliations with nerd culture and his writing: “I’m an artist, so try to avoid being too much of a partisan” (Zaurino).

There are a number of areas in which Díaz is willing to be a partisan: the racial politics of book prizes, President Obama, and most notably for this argument, the representation of language itself. Throughout this paper I have written the author’s name with a diacritical “í,” as he has in both of his books. However his name has experienced a typographical evolution over the course of his literary career, with publications continuing to struggle with the political challenge of the “foreign accent” encoded in Díaz itself. The New York Times “Times Topic” page for “Junot Diaz” continued to have it both ways as late as April 2011, with the Americanized title belied by book reviews with the name spelled correctly. Database copies of newspaper reviews reveal a number of character encoding issues, often replacing the “í” with an error character similar to “□”, though most databases recognize both “Diaz” and “Díaz” as potential matches for Junot Díaz. This is not to argue that such errors are intentional, but rather that the failure to reproduce non-English diacritical markings, particularly í, which is unique to Spanish, is a sign of telling neglect by American media. Díaz’s choice to emphasize this aspect of his heritage is part of a larger effort to integrate these markings of cultural difference into the typographical mainstream.61

61 The story of the “í” is also a technological one: as word processing software has increasingly made us our own typesetters as well as editors, scholars and writers of Latino/a and Chicano/a literature have been able to reclaim the diacritical markings that publishers were once unwilling or unable to reproduce (Moya).
The primary tactic Díaz uses for this purpose is obvious: his code-switching style of mixed English, Spanish and Spanish terms in his novels. Countless critics and readers have remarked on these un-italicized terms. The lack of distinguishing emphasis is crucial: by refusing to differentiate these words, Díaz argues that they are part of the same linguistic fabric as the slang, cultural references and mainstream English prose with which they are mingled:

Allowed the Spanish to exist in my text without the benefit of italics or quotation marks was a very important political move. Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why ‘other’ it? Why denormalize it? By keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English.

But you're right, Diógenes. About the violence. When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I've tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English. (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant)

The refusal of italics implicitly asks readers to perform a contextual interpolation, to learn the words and sound them out instead of bracketing them or translating them. Díaz even asserted his militancy on this issue with the single most important advocate for his career, the New Yorker: “I was opposed to letting them italicize any Spanish
that I wrote in my columns. I stood my ground and now, no references to a foreign language are carried in italics in the *New Yorker* (“Create Relevant Literature for Future Gen”). Whether or not Díaz and other Latino/a and Chicano/a writers who choose to compose in English still “have a music, a flavor, their own unmistakable style: the Hispanic style” (Ween 30), Díaz is making a political point for the English-speaking mainstream. He is only one of several Latino/a and Chicano/a writers exploring the politically charged zone of code-switching, but Díaz also performs a second kind of radicalism by engaging the parallel universe of untranslated Elvish.

Before we discuss nerds in earnest, it’s important to consider the complex political roles of language in Díaz’s work, the “violence” involved. By choosing to write in English Díaz engages with the hegemony of normative American culture head-on, acknowledging its power while still struggling to accelerate the linguistic integration of English and Spanish. As he put it in terms dictionary nerd David Foster Wallace might have appreciated: “I don’t need a hundred years for the *Oxford English Dictionary* to tell me that it’s okay to adopt this or that word as part of our normal vocabulary….We should be pushing the dates on words” (Ch’ien 204). In this sense, Díaz sees his work as an inherently violent form of education, a rough recapitulation of his own experience learning English “that unintelligibility is an absolute bedrock component of language” (Ch’ien 201). In other words, Díaz has worked to make his language difficult in a particularly productive way, not to claim an unbreachable difference based on ethnicity, but to argue that we are all implicated in one another’s

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62 A number of scholars have written on this subject. For a clear overview and discussion of the phenomenon in 1990s U.S. literature, see Lourdes Torres’s “In the Contact Zone.”
63 This term also shares productive overlaps with what Sáez and Dalleo term “opacity” (85, 102).
languages, that jumbling cultures and words can together can be both bruising and enlightening. This is truly a constructive kind of revenge, a reverse-colonization of the mainstream American imaginary.

By insisting on blending codes and discourses beyond Dominican and “standard” English, Díaz alienates himself from particular communities in the tradition of successful postcolonial writers around the globe (Brouillette 60). In applying the same technique to subcultures within the mainstream United States, he makes a subtler point about racial politics. As an immigrant, Díaz found solace not in his identity as a Dominican American, since that identity was continually pressured by poverty and racial bias. Instead:

What saved my life was being a nerd, watching all those bad science fiction movies and reading cartoons. It really saved my life. I was fucking pissed off. Poverty is a motherfucker. And at my age I didn't have the language. I was like, why do I hate myself so much? Why do I feel so bad all the time? Yo, I had no language for it, and there’s a lot of shame to it. Being that broke. (Ch’ien 221)

This deliberate rejection of normative behavior is a standard part of being a nerd, but the staging is usually quite different. As Mary Bucholtz argues, nerds perform as “hyperwhite,” using “superstandard English” (as Oscar Wao does with his “flash words”) and rejecting “cool” culture, which usually adapts and attempts to deracialize elements of African American culture (Bucholtz 86, 87; Díaz, Oscar Wao 50). While I believe the racialization of the nerdy is more complex than Bucholz suggests, her central observation about language is telling in Díaz’s exploration of nerd subculture,
which is at once welcoming to intellectual refugees and resistant to racial inclusiveness.  

By drawing together Spanish, English, literary culture, nerd culture and other discourses into one vibrant creole, Díaz successfully appeals to a broad American readership, as we have seen in the graphs above. But his particular embrace of nerd culture accomplishes another goal for the mainstream reader, leading us to confront our own investment in popular cultures. Does the reader identify with the “cool” mainstream or the “hyperwhite” nerd culture? The nerd, by pushing away non-canonical and transgressive elements of his own cultural universe (i.e. the refusal to invite Díaz to speak at conventions, or ‘bending over backwards to deny Tolkien’s racism’), defines an extreme, interior superstructure of white popular culture. It is the tribal narrative of the member who takes his myths too seriously, who tries too hard and sounds too white. But Díaz inverts this situation, pulling the figure of the nerd to the outside, proving it to be another external relation, another way in which white culture reflects and traffics in African American, Caribbean and other sources for the real power of the alien and the fantastic.

The character Oscar addresses nerds directly by “contaminating the nerdy with the painfully real,” but he also highlights the pervasive power of the normative to erase differences and gloss over societal problems (Zaurino). By embracing the elevated diction and obscure references of nerd culture, Oscar Wao upends our conception of the nerd by linking it to the traumas of immigrant life. We are all faced with unintelligibility as readers of Drown and Oscar Wao, brought to confront the

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64 For a discussion of racial constructions of the nerd in American culture, see Eglash.
fissures between notions of America and immigrant communities and within the idea of America itself. The multiplicity of Díaz’s prose, his deliberate polyvocalism, defies conventional ideals of assimilation by demonstrating just how fragile our notion of the mainstream is, how quickly Oscar can leapfrog beyond “white” to “hyperwhite,” upping the ante of the nerd by becoming a “ghetonerd.” The psychological fuel that powers this narrative engine is the story of Díaz himself, an original ghettonerd, who began crafting his writing as a response to the ways in which other immigrant writers catered to mainstream expectations about their lives. Sitting on a writing panel, he realized that his colleagues “were putting on this mask to try to hide the nerd….The great silence on that panel was the silence of this experience these guys lived immediately. Being nerds, loving words, being writers, going to elite graduate schools, going to elite schools—that was the huge silence” (Ch’ien 226).

The story of Díaz the nerd, then, is ultimately a story about reconfiguring literary reception, engaging in a violent assault on English to carve out a new political space for language. As one Amazon reviewer (who felt as unfamiliar with his nerd allusions as with his use of Spanish) wrote: “As a white, middle-aged woman in mid-america [sic], the world of Oscar is about as far off as another planet. However, thanks to Junot Diaz, I was able to travel there and be sincerely touched by what I ‘saw’” (Reinert). Just as minorities of previous generations gained traction by extracting interior white cultural constructs like Latin verse or classical music and excelling at them, Díaz claims nerdhood as his own. By asserting his membership in mutually contradictory groups, Díaz has led us to spell out our own silent boundaries and ask ourselves when untranslated Spanish is really not the same as untranslated Elvish.
Making this observation for himself at that writing panel, Díaz concluded that “there was just something about that silence that needed to be addressed.” His career as a public Dominican nerd, a professor at MIT, no less, has been a study in the silences of scarcity during the long years between books and the explosiveness of language within *Drown* and *Oscar Wao*. His adaptation of nerd culture creates a new avenue for reader empathy to these Dominican resident aliens, but it also reclaims the shared imaginary of American culture as a Caribbean, African, polysemic territory.

**Language Arts: Díaz and Wallace**

In 2010, Pomona College conducted a search to replace Wallace as a tenured creative writing professor: Junot Díaz made the short list before withdrawing for unspecified reasons, and Pomona ended up selecting Jonathan Lethem to fill the Roy Disney Chair. Díaz and Wallace’s profiles in terms of reviews and academic attention are similar—Wallace has more mentions in the Modern Language Association Bibliography, but when averaged by year, his longer presence on the literary stage has been less eventful than Díaz’s more recent and rapid ascendance.\(^65\) The favorable reviews of Wallace’s posthumous *The Pale King* seem to presage his continued elevation to an American postmodern canon, but Díaz has the advantage of still living and writing. The number of interviews alone that Díaz gives is staggering, and his prestige in the literary field encompasses his social presence as a judge of literary prizes, participant at major events and high-profile advocate of political and cultural

\(^{65}\) A search in April, 2011 revealed that Díaz had 29 hits from 2000 – 2010, while Wallace has 59 from 1993 – 2011.
causes. His career has been both meteoric in its rise and slow in publication pace, and Díaz may be defining a new role for an engaged, public form of authorship.

Whatever their positions as author-icons might be, their literary reception still revolves tightly around their published books, and Díaz and Wallace have ultimately been celebrated for their impact on language. *Newsweek* praised Díaz as a “linguistic omnivore”; The *New Yorker* said Wallace “conjured the world in two-hundred-word sentences that mixed formal diction and street slang, technicales and plain speech” (D. Gates; Max). For all their differences of background, style, and agenda, the two writers occupy similar positions in literary culture. Many reviewers have placed Díaz in the debt of Wallace, suggesting that his use of long, discursive footnotes is homage to Wallace’s characteristic digressions. Díaz counters that this element of his style is based on the work of the Martinican writer and founder of the *créolité* movement Patrick Chamoiseau, particularly his novel *Texaco*. In a larger sense, however, both writers switch linguistic codes to make essentially moral and political arguments about the direction of American culture.

The discourse of nerds is central to both writers’ projects. Wallace and Díaz make their arguments through the dialect of different sub-genres of nerds: comic books, science fiction, grammar and television. I interpret the fact that they settled on these discourses of extreme erudition, of knowledge worn on the sleeve, as a stylistic response to a changing literary culture. Both writers confront the challenge of maintaining attention when their books must compete with the televisual and digital distractions of the Information Age. Their answer has been, in very different ways, to use style as a kind of dialog, to meditate reflexively and publicly on the choices they
have made. Díaz discusses his linguistic politics in practically every interview he has ever given, while Wallace questions his stylistic positions repeatedly in footnotes and extensively in his essay “Authority and American Usage.” These are fundamentally nerdy things to do, and while nerd discourse is regrettably undertheorized (as we will see in the coming paragraph), we can make a few observations based on Wallace and Díaz’s literary adaptations.

In many ways, when Díaz uses the term “nerd” he also means “fan”—Oscar loves his comic books, his fantasy novels and science fiction movies—but there are important distinctions here and Díaz chose his term well. As Matt Hills argues in the definitive Fan Cultures: “To claim the identity of a ‘fan’ remains, in some sense, to claim an ‘improper’ identity, a cultural identity based on one's commitment to something as seemingly unimportant and ‘trivial’ as a film or TV series” (xii). Díaz and Wallace both write from this subaltern perspective, reveling in a stylized over-enthusiasm for particular kinds of knowledge, from dialect inflections to Tolkien references. But where Hills and scholars like Henry Jenkins explore fandom as a kind of community, the nerd discourse these writers are employing is both more solitary and more diffuse, a general cultural attitude or discursive style as opposed to a particular set of interests. The points I will make below certainly overlap with studies of fan communities, but I posit that both Wallace and Díaz are writing about the individual, not the collective, and that the solitary nature of these individual protests against mainstream culture establishes an important form of difference as they explore the political challenges of language.
The naming of names and explicit establishment of mental connections plays a major role for both authors, as when Díaz describes Trujillo with a complex set of signifiers from popular culture. By leaping across genres and the highbrow/lowlbrow divide, both writers also implicitly argue for cross-cultural relevance, just as the untranslated Spanish and unglossed vocabularies do. Finally, the earnestness with which nerd discourses make themselves visible, enunciating categories and genre boundary lines (even when they are being overstepped), is an intellectual invitation to the reader, a recognition that the term “audience” has much more agency in the digital, hypermediated era. Like the subjects in Bucholz’s study who went out of their way to pronounce every word fully and clearly, the language of nerds is hyperliterate—conscious of the speaker’s responsibility to sustain an intellectual ecology of knowledge, whether it be superheroes or tennis pros. Both Díaz and Wallace deploy nerd discourse to play with and transcend its internal boundaries, rigorous categories and schools of thought. But they also create these stylistic invitations to prove a larger point about the essential loneliness of contemporary intellectual life, the inherent violence and unintelligibility at the heart of English, and the need for forms of community and shared discourse.

These impulses surface in the data explored above in a number of ways. In commercial terms, the nerd dialects each author engages with have been interpreted as revelatory and expansive instead of limiting. While Wallace is linked to Practical Magic and Volpone and Other Plays, his real nerd stature lies in the multiple reading guides and interpretive texts associated with his subnet, indicating that his work is viewed as a nerdish subject of its own at least as much as it is a commentary on extant
cultural practices. Likewise, Díaz is not linked to an array of comic book collections or science fiction novels in Amazon recommendations, but rather to another kind of sub-genre, Pulitzer Fiction, and to textbooks like *Representation* and *Latin Boom.* Perhaps more importantly, Díaz also operates in the shadow of Wallace here, his *Oscar Wao* judged in light of *Infinite Jest.* Born six years earlier, Wallace had a head start on Díaz by publishing *Broom of the System* soon after leaving college. In *Infinite Jest* is recommended from *Oscar Wao,* and in Figure 26 Wallace occupies a level of prestige on par with Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa. Of course, all of these writers are ranked below Tolkien, who is in turn ranked below Trujillo. The connection that most readers perceive is a stylistic one. On Amazon, almost every mention of Wallace in Díaz’s Amazon reviews involved footnotes, “mock erudite,” “detailed [and] page-eating” (Brunyate; Stone).

True to form, everyday readers also interpret the nerd discourses both authors use as personally revelatory. One self-described Mexicano discusses the risk of beatings his own bookishness presented during his youth: “So when I read that part about Oscar just wanting to read, man I FELT for the guy. It was one of those great moments of literary gold where you not only feel you truly understand the character but you also feel the character truly understands you” (Rodriguez). These reactions suggest the ways in which both authors successfully employ nerd discourse as a way of inflecting their texts without culturally marking them. It offers a kind of dialog, a social logic of empathy that we are all familiar with from our private fandoms and obsessions, and it serves to create an interpersonal connection of the sort that I described as “integral” in discussing Wallace. Like Michael Chabon and other
contemporaries who explore genre forms, Díaz and Wallace channel the emotional impact of nerd discourse while avoiding the commitments and the blind spots of genre fiction.

Despite the proximity of reader reactions to dialect games in their works, Wallace and Díaz use nerd style for different ends, arguing for the dangers of mediation and addiction in Wallace’s case and the pervasiveness of bias and the dangers of normative whiteness in Díaz’s. Both also discuss their politically charged linguistic choices often in the public record. In “Authority and American Usage,” Wallace makes the case for the importance of dialects and the bald elitism of “hyperwhite” or what he calls “Standard White English:”

In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE…. [S]ome of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair, and… pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever really changing them. (Consider the Lobster 108-9)

Wallace prefaces this revelation by alluding to his own position of childhood ill-treatment, having learned, like Oscar, that the nerd who cannot blend in linguistically, who insists on using “flash words” and demonstrating his SWE mastery when another dialect is called for, will be “punished for his failure to learn” by his more adaptable peers (Consider the Lobster 103). But as he demonstrates with his playful interplay of
footnotes, erudite asides and commanding synthesis of American grammar and language education disputes, Wallace as a writer pours all of his talent into the upper echelons of SWE, using his prose as ongoing research in experimental nerd prose. Díaz puts nerd discourse to a different use, deploying it to alienate particular kinds of readers in the same way that his free-flowing Spanglish does. The comic book villain Galactus and Derek Walcott are placed on equal footing in the epigraphs to Oscar Wao, and Díaz forces us to consider both as potentially foreign cultural zones.

Wallace and Díaz, then, are dichotomous, radical stylists operating from the same basic observation about the politics of language in America. The conservative of the two, Wallace seeks to reform language bias from the inside, as a master of SWE who struggles to create new spaces for honesty and genuine exchange: what he calls “advanced U.S. citizenship” (Consider the Lobster 72). Wallace’s writing extends SWE by articulating contemporary consciousness, asking us to consider the power of television and media in general to corrode our thinking selves, our best, most nerdy, linguistic selves. This is a formulation Díaz would not shy away from, as a writer who is also struggling to change conceptions of American language and his position as an American citizen—but rather than reform, Díaz writes for revolution. His “revenge on English” ingeniously breaks down the grammatical and structural dividers that Wallace so creatively deploys: italics and all-caps are replaced by a uniform dialect stream of real-world language. The “black students…bright and inquisitive as hell” to whom Wallace describes delivering his speech about the importance of learning SWE are on the opposite side of the class and ethnic divide, the Díaz side (Consider the Lobster 108). Like some of those students, Díaz rejects Wallace’s premise that he can
be a Toni Morrison or a Baldwin and write “totally ass-kicking SWE” but that he cannot change the rules of the game until he has proven his mastery of it (Consider the Lobster 109). To be sure, Díaz does demonstrate his mastery of both SWE language and culture, through vivid metaphors, tightly crafted prose rhythms and deft cultural allusions. But this mastery is offered not as a prerequisite to a thematic argument, as Morrison uses a modernist style to narrate the African American experience. Rather, Díaz organically integrates his own bold SWE style with an aggressive linguistic turn, revitalizing SWE with the dialects it normally excludes.

By troubling nerd dialects with diasporic echoes (i.e. casting Tolkien in the light of racial tension), Díaz succeeds in the intellectual reverse-colonization project I have argued for here. One Amazon reviewer of Oscar Wao made this point neatly by arguing that the novel is “an antidote for ‘Heart of Darkness’” (Rodriguez). He quotes his favorite line from the book, one which many other reviewers have also commented on: “You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart, bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest” (Oscar Wao 22). The reviewer quoted earlier who compared Díaz’s use of Spanish to Tolkien’s Elvish made the same implicit argument in reverse, titling his review “A Mythology for the Dominican Republic.” The mutual troubling of the fantastic and the real encourages readers to dismantle, if only for the time it takes to read the novel, the linguistic and cultural walls we erect between “literary fiction” and nerdy genres, between SWE and language in the streets, and between our conflicting definitions of identity.
In many ways, both Díaz and Wallace clearly felt like X-men themselves, based on their descriptions of childhood and the ways in which they have addressed these issues in their writing. The new styles they pioneered are indeed antidotes: to colonial history, to the loneliness of mediation, to racial divides and linguistic barriers of all kinds. By recasting the question of style as one of tensions between individuals and communities, they have identified a new kind of centrality for literature, creating novels where readers can reassure themselves that the disparate interests and segmented affiliations we feel as cultural consumers do still connect together and share some larger significance. In an era with countless new dialects and styles of information, these writers have found ways to create forms of literary unity out of a paradoxical attention to difficulty and the productive work of reading. In the process of appealing to the nerd in each of us they have developed new bonds of community with and among their readers.
Conclusions

If this project is to end in the same empirical spirit as it began with, it is important to ask what conclusions we can draw from these three case studies. I’d like to offer three answers to this question. To begin with, the case study model allows us to look closely not just at the ways in which literary networks are formed, but at the process of research and observation itself. Because the study of book culture is necessarily complex and difficult to define precisely, the work I have done here is contingent on assumptions about the relevancy of some elements of reader experience that have often been dismissed or glossed over. Second, I will argue that each author in this case study has achieved a measure of fame through a combination of talent and an astute engagement with the borders of literary territories: genre, theme, historicity and identity. In short, they all have a protean quality in common, an ability to defy our literary expectations without disappointing us in their defiance. This position leads directly to my third conclusion, that the literary networks affiliated with these authors echo something distinctly personal about them, and that it is possible to discern a kind of style in the structures their readers have created.

Over the course of this project my methodology has evolved continuously from complex networks to simple diagrams. My initial research on Thomas Pynchon involved sophisticated Named Entity Recognition software, elaborate and rebellious physics-simulation models of recommendation networks, and graphs so difficult to decipher that neither my reading committee nor my immediate family could be
induced to stare at them for long. In the three years since then I have learned to simplify my data analysis and reduce the clutter in my visualizations. This has been a Kuhnian process of narrowing the critical paradigm to focus on a consistent pattern of truths, and I am certain that another researcher could draw different insights from the data I have used here. While this process may have left me with results that are more modest, I hope that they have also been more clear, and that they open doors to future research.

By focusing primarily on the digital traces of literary distinction, recommendations and book reviews, this project has inverted the traditional literary pyramid. The text is not the bedrock of critical inquiry here but the capstone of the structure, a literary idea that thousands or millions of readers construct together. Of course this does not mean that I have ignored the role of the author in these engagements, but rather that my conception of reading and text are fundamentally social ones. We read and contextualize books together through shared language, cultural cues and frames of reference. Accept this claim, and the modality of the network follows: we situate texts into extant webs of ideas. References and allusions are related to one another because that is how we use them, navigating new textual spaces using signposts and comparisons to places we have been before.

This project is a form of ‘distant reading,’ but a reading twice removed—we move first from the particular text to discussions of that text, and second from an individual reading to an aggregate, statistically driven overview. This approach puts us squarely in the middle zone that Mark Granovetter identified as so crucial to the study of networks: neither micro nor macro, it allows us to focus on the work of a particular
author while still making general claims about a relatively large group of readers, shifting the basis of the discussion from literary criticism to a more perspicacious form of contemporary literary history (1360). On this basis we can make arguments about the specificity of particular writers as they have established positions of prestige in American culture, but from each vantage point in this study, the others are visible. Pynchon, Morrison, Wallace and Díaz all appear in one another’s networks because they all share a particular kind of fame that transcends the academy and the bestseller list. They are all writers who have successfully defied the labels of highbrow, lowbrow or middlebrow and have maintained very distinct senses of style and authorial presence in their work. For all of their overlaps in recommendations and reviews in the pages above, it is difficult to imagine a reader mistaking a page from any one of these writers for the work of another. That kind of “distinction” is, I believe, part of what distinguishes these writers in the sense of the word that I have employed throughout this project. Their prestige derives from writing that operates at the intersection of individual style and communal dialog. They set themselves apart by speaking uniquely about problems that confront broad communities, perhaps entire literary generations.

For Pynchon, Morrison, Wallace and Díaz, this has meant writing about and across the cultural fault lines of genre, biography, ethnicity, theme and reader expectations. Defying the impulses of a market that had asked Richard Wright to soften the brutal honesty of Native Son’s ending just a generation earlier, Toni Morrison broke down the walls enclosing the African American literary experience as never before, flooding the mainstream and the airwaves with emotionally difficult but widely accessible fiction. Pynchon and Wallace have gazed unflinchingly into the
depths of our technologically mediated, capitalist souls and developed stylistic tools for sharing what they have seen with a wide general audience. Díaz has asked us to rethink the community of the English language itself.

Throughout these case studies, clusters of texts have indicated the ways in which we order literature in the marketplace and in criticism. Each of these writers has developed individual responses to the pressures of genre, co-opting elements as diverse as the mystery, the bildungsroman and the parable, in Morrison’s case, and weaving these scraps of different literary territories together to create new forms. We might think of this as the inverse of the “anxiety of influence,” a swagger or confidence in one’s materials that has made each of these writers literary hubs in larger networks. By engaging with many cultural fields they have successfully brought diverse groups of readers together, offering each participant contingent elements of familiarity and the new. This is, I believe, the heart of literary fame: the ability to draw together readers in a challenging but productive conversation, one in which participants feel as if they have advanced or expanded in a fundamental intellectual way.

These interactions with readers are highly complex and arguably limitless. How could we trace the lifelong impact of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao on the readers I quoted in Chapter 3 without some sort of Borges-like experiment in omniscient criticism? However, the traces captured here in these core samples of the social lives of books reveal the ways in which different authors inspire very different critical and contextual styles. Pynchon’s professional readers linked him to a rich tapestry of European intellectual tradition, while his readers on Amazon took up his
engagements with television, music and popular culture. Wallace’s readers take his own intensively reflexive intellectualism seriously, generating a flood of footnote-laden posts on the Infinite Summer website as they earnestly worked through *Infinite Jest* (Baldwin). For each of these writers, the complex *negocios* they performed with the marketplace and with various literary fields appear as distinct patterns of connection in the networks we have explored above.

This is another juncture at which the value of humanistic inquiry threatens to be subsumed by avalanches of empirical data. We might miss the kind of argument that Alan Liu makes in *The Laws of Cool*: “Cool is a style of information” (195). Liu argues that “cool” consumption involves the commodification and redistribution of subcultures, a notion we can expand to involve genres and fields of literature that are also “excluded by definition from normal work” (100). The readers in these case studies develop their own community styles of information as they work together. On a higher level of abstraction, the networks we have explored here bear out the truth that “the more information we have, the more we need filters, and one of the most powerful filters we have is the filtration of style” (Lanham 19). These writers demonstrate their skill in highly complex cultural games through their mastery of style. By successfully synthesizing very different kinds of information in their work, they inspire literary networks that are similarly ambitious, like the coded semaphore broadcast of *The Crying of Lot 49* from a San Jose office tower or the theater adaptation of *Oscar Wao*, “Fúku Americanus” (“San Jose Semaphore”; Jones). Within the scope of this project, we can see the difference in how readers contextualize David Foster Wallace with a tightly integrated, deeply interior cluster of works, and Junot
Díaz with texts that reach across linguistic and stylistic boundaries to engage with many different writers.

As any empirical investigation should do, this project ends with suggestions for further research. The networks of literary experience are far more complicated than the graphs I have traced out here: sales figures, social networks of authorial contact and library charge records are just a few examples of new areas that might be explored. Furthermore, by limiting this research to the middle zone, I have defined the practical boundaries of what an individual scholar can reasonably accomplish, but this new kind of literary reception cries out for collaborative research and a much larger scope—a long look at the macro to balance out the already thriving Pynchon, Morrison, Wallace and Díaz industries of close reading and textual analysis. As the experience of reading continues to shift, new tools are making it possible to experience community in literature as never before.

New Vistas

One of the most surprising results of these case studies has been the consistency with which traditional notions of genre and taste continue to shape literary experience. Time and again I have uncovered internally thick networks of detective fiction, graphic novels and Pulitzer Prize-winners, to choose a few examples. There is something comforting about genre literature, where the rules of art are widely known and it is entirely acceptable, as Jan Radway reported, for readers to read the ending of a novel to ensure that conventions are being upheld before they purchase it (Reading
The familiarity of metanarrative rules is obviously an important element of storytelling, and it serves a valuable literary purpose for gifted writers like the ones we have studied here, who adapt these expected narratives to powerful new purposes, like Junot Díaz’s reverse-colonization of Tolkien.

Ironically, and perhaps not coincidentally, this conservatism comes at a time when the functions of narrative are rapidly expanding in digital spaces. Most of the major videogame franchises cautiously derive their multi-million dollar plots from a handful of genre standbys: the war epic, the horror story, the mystery and other familiar models. These adaptations often confront the boundaries of genre rules in unintentionally blunt ways: players of a classic puzzle-solving adventure like the Space Quest series will quickly learn that a seemingly limitless narrative universe is actually straitened to a very narrow-minded set of problems and solutions, while players of Grand Theft Auto IV will discover that it is far easier to steal a car than it is to drive it legally. In other arenas, like interactive fiction, genre tropes provide a useful guide for readers operating in an unfamiliar environment, and the interface of the computer screen lends itself naturally to genres of suspense and discovery, such as detective fiction.

This reliance on genre can often serve as an impetus for forming communities by creating shared ground between consumers of a particular cultural product. As the spaces for dialog between cultural authors and their fans become better elaborated and more interactive, new kinds of relationships are forming. The popular fantasy novelist George R. R. Martin, for example, has a complex relationship with his fans based on their deep devotion to his A Song of Ice and Fire novels and their frustration at his
slow pace in completing the series, spawning what Laura Miller calls a “shadow fandom” of devoted yet merciless critics (33). These relationships can turn into real collaborations, which is what has happened with Martin and Elio García, a Cuban-American who lives in Sweden and maintains an encyclopedic knowledge of the fictional universe Martin has constructed (Miller 35). In addition to fielding questions from the author about continuity issues in his own work, García is coauthoring a guide to the novels with Martin and works as a paid consultant for spin-off products from the series. Martin himself is a professed lifelong fan, frequently attending conventions and considering himself part of a fan community well before he became a prominent author. In other words, Martin’s experience as an author was shaped by new kinds of cultural investments that he made as a collaborative consumer. In this way, Martin represents a more extreme form of the argument I make in Chapter 3 about David Foster Wallace and Junot Díaz, writers whose experiences with contemporary consumer culture deeply shaped their work.

As new generations of writers mature in a world where electronic books and digital reading have always been ubiquitous, how will their experiences change the nature of fiction? One answer lies in the decreasing significance of the book as a physical commodity and a cultural unit. The emergence of websites like Byliner.com gives prominent authors like Jon Krakauer and William Vollmann a platform for publishing long-form journalism without being dependent on traditional news media. Krakauer’s 75-page long exposé of educational non-profit CEO (and multiple bestseller author) Greg Mortensen is too long to be described as an article by contemporary standards and too short to be marketed as a book. The decline of pay
periodicals attests to our ongoing transition from farmers of subscriptions into grazers of far-flung cultural pastures. Publishers seem to be gradually learning how to capitalize on these newly fleeting audiences. Digital readers and e-commerce systems are making micro-transactions possible, such as the Readability model, which asks readers to pay a voluntary monthly fee to be distributed among the publishers of work they read online (“Readability”). Because of the quick evolution of the hardware and software platforms on which contemporary innovations in reading are taking place, it is impossible to know whether such initiatives will survive for a year, much less a decade. However, their cumulative impact will continue to reshape the system of literary prestige from books to more immediate forms of production, a trend Junot Díaz already espouses by publishing far more serialized short stories than complete volumes.

As George R. R. Martin has learned, the new realities of digital community make different kinds of fan engagement possible, shifting an author’s foundation of prestige from the published to the personal. Martin’s fans complain that he watches too much football in the fall and that his blog posts about politics and other non-fantasy subjects prove he is not working hard enough on completing the series—an artistic work to which they, as consumers, feel entitled (Miller 33). In this sense, forms of collective dialog and collective action can bring new meaning to the idea of an imagined community. On the Internet, community is a much more elastic and potentially involved term than merely a group of people mediated through books, and as digital technologies publicize larger portions of our everyday lives, authorial prestige will continue to evolve into a kind of cerebral, communitarian celebrity.
The most radical extensions of reading are taking place in these identity-construction zones, spaces where our electronic devices and digital personae communicate more or less independently from us. Smartphones record our locations, Twitter feeds reveal unexpected details about our activities, and automated updates of many kinds share information about the cultural products we are reading and viewing, often without our knowledge. This is Amazon’s passively panoptic recommendation system writ large, with companies like Facebook hoping to track our cultural activities across hundreds of major websites, in order to share these actions with our “friends” and advertisers. A few years ago, it seemed entirely likely that Facebook, like so many other social networking startups, would disappear within the decade. In 2011, it played a major role in fomenting populist uprisings across the Middle East, creating a situation in Egypt that only Marck Zuckerberg could have thought possible: The Egyptian military now makes its announcements first on Facebook. The basic institutions of culture are changing.

This endorsement of virtual community spaces and the blurring of agency between digital and real will ultimately have a profound effect on literary culture as well. Literary production and consumption, the taproots of textual cultural experience, will continue to evolve as younger writers emerge who have spent their whole lives defining significant portions of their social identities online. Digital platforms are already introducing new kinds of collective action into the traditional, solitary reading experience: many, such as Amazon’s Kindle, allow readers to share their comments.

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66 Facebook executives apparently took special steps to protect the identities of protest leaders (Giglio), though others argue that a real accounting of this claim will take much more investigative work (Morozov).
and highlighted passages. By default, readers of a new text will see the phrases most frequently marked by others, creating a new kind of palimpsest of attention and paratextual prestige. The fan-created wikis for Pynchon, Wallace and Díaz will likely be succeeded by commenting and sharing architectures built into new generations of digital reading tools, developing the trend of what Ted Striphas calls “algorithmic culture” (“How to Have Culture”). Scholars like Kathleen Fitzpatrick have already begun experimenting with collaborative peer review of their work in progress through the MediaCommons initiative and its reviewing platform, CommentPress. Fitzpatrick identifies the same fundamental issues that I discuss in this project when she writes of “the need to situate the text within a social network, within the community of readers who wish to interact with that text, and with one another through and around that text” (Fitzpatrick). Specific groups of readers have already begun using tools like CommentPress to share insights and significant passages around a particular text digitally, and as these tools become more sophisticated they will invite new kinds of collaboration across the divide of author/reader.

Fitzpatrick’s example demonstrates that these tools will also shift the ground of criticism, as the slow decline of traditional book-reviewing has already begun to do. Steve Wasserman, former editor of the Los Angeles Times Book Review, noted in a reflection on this sea change that the surest way to keep such criticism alive is to focus on books as “news that stays news”—texts that appear as fresh and relevant for readers a decade or century after publication as they do on the launch date (49). The news, particularly literary news, is becoming more personalized as the filters of style and attention lead us to sample ever smaller portions of a rapidly growing digital
mediascape. At the same time the proliferation of social media is multiplying and

distributing the concept of authorship, allowing each of us to create tailored forms of
textual broadcast through streams and feeds that are typically laden with critical acts
of distinction. Amazon’s ethos of crowd-driven ratings and reviews has inspired sites
like LibraryThing and Goodreads where reviewers are encouraged to evaluate books
and share those thoughts with their friends. As these webs of distributed prestige grow
more elaborate, they begin to form their own cultural fields that naturally elevate some
works and authors to positions of high distinction. Google’s repeated efforts to
integrate a user’s social network into its basic search function is just one example.67

The company argues that results and commentary from our friends will inevitably be
more relevant than those from strangers. In effect, these initiatives acknowledge the
power of culture to determine reality. When we start thinking about this kind of
socially driven filtering in the literary context, it becomes clear that our own acts of
critical distinction will become increasingly important as they are magnified within the
peer communities we value the most.

All of these changes will alter different elements of the reading equation:
authorship, community, formats and praxis. The literary marketplace continues to shift
under the feet of publishers and writers struggling adapt to changing cultural
paradigms. At the same time, almost all of these digital tools afford new opportunities
for readers to interact with one another and with writers and critics in surprising new
ways. As the networks we have explored in the preceding chapters demonstrate, a

67 Most recently, this has involved a service called “+1” that allows users to endorse a particular link.
The feature is designed to emulate the “like” thumbs-up button available to users on Facebook (“Google
+1 Button”).

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tremendous amount of energy flows into the game of culture, and we are only now beginning to harness it into new forms of collective production. The forms of prestige that we grant to our favored artists and writers will effectively be determined by larger and more democratic groups, and those acts of elevation will seem less like the awarding of elite prizes and more like inclusions in enthusiastic conversations. The social lives of books are getting more interesting every day.
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