

"Proof of the Loop": Patterns of Habitual Denial in Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* and Don DeLillo's *Libra*

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In Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, an anonymous authorial figure works with the reader to sort through evidence, attempting to construct plausible explanations for the disappearances of former Vietnam veteran John Wade and his wife, Kathy. As in other novels by O'Brien, the authorial figure he constructs is also a Vietnam veteran, and the work becomes, in part, a meditation on the lingering effects of the war on those who took part in it. In an "author's note" appended to Don DeLillo's *Libra*, an authorial figure enters at the end of the text, writing of it as a "work of imagination" that "makes no claims to literal truth" in its construction of plausible events leading up to Lee Harvey Oswald's part in the Kennedy assassination.¹ Since both works incorporate and rely heavily on readers' memories of actual historical events and personages, the terms "novel" and "fiction" inadequately describe them. Both works are instead, in Linda Hutcheon's renowned terms, postmodern historiographic metafiction. Such works expose history as constructed narrative, and they eventually ask us "to question how we represent—how we construct—our view of reality and of ourselves" (Hutcheon 42).²

In a sense, such an authorial strategy posits two protagonists: not only the central character in a story that is being told, but also the teller of that story, an unnamed figure who sorts through incomplete and conflicting bits of evidence in a narrative effort that becomes its own drama. In these novels by O'Brien and DeLillo, the storytellers foreground the speculative nature of their efforts to reconstruct convincingly that which eventually led to the disappearance of John Wade in the Lake of the Woods and the death of Lee Oswald³ in Dallas. As in other metafictional efforts, the foregrounding of an authorial presence in these two works invites readers to observe and take part in the personal, subjective process of historical construction,

and to realize in doing so that our own acceptance of the stories of history is a self-protective response to the seemingly unacceptable alternative of chaotic indeterminacy. I will argue here that a further distinguishing characteristic of these two fictions is the attempt made in each to understand the actions of an individual/character on the public stage by meticulously reconstructing his habitual patterns of thought. The metafictional strategy is thereby directed in each work toward a questioning of the stories we construct for ourselves of other individuals in what amounts to another habitual, overly automatized act: convincing ourselves that we know others well and that we thus understand their behavior.

O'Brien and DeLillo initially complicate the act of "knowing" another person by drawing attention to the roles of their authorial figures as speculative information gatherers of evidence regarding the apparent personalities of their protagonists. O'Brien's storyteller makes his presence known gradually. The first chapter appears to be told by a traditionally anonymous third-person narrator, but the second, a mixed bag of quotations, lists, and election results labeled "Evidence," while still a third-person strategy, implies a personality who has gathered it. The fifth chapter, "Hypothesis," further raises the question of who is posing the hypotheticals in this chapter full of 'maybes.' At the end of the sixth chapter, again entitled "Evidence," a storyteller directly introduces himself in a footnote: "Biographer, historian, medium—call me what you want" (O'Brien, *Lake* 30). He tells us that he's been at work on this story for four frustrating years, and frankly adds that "even what might appear to be fact in this narrative—action, word, thought—must ultimately be viewed as a diligent but still imaginative reconstruction of events" (O'Brien, *Lake* 30). As in *The Things They Carried*, in which the narrator also introduces himself in first-person footnotes, O'Brien's storyteller bears marked similarities to O'Brien himself, further complicating the boundaries between fact and fiction, and between reality and the stories we make as constructions of reality.

The narrative mission of reconstructing the life of a character and his actions is also performed by the narrator of *Libra*, but the storyteller's anonymity is maintained throughout. The inevitably

speculative nature of DeLillo's own narrative task is instead implied by occasional glimpses of the fictional efforts of Nicholas Branch, a "retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency" who has been rehired to write "the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy" (DeLillo 14). Ensnared in a paper-filled room in the fifteenth year of his labor, Branch is no closer to assembling a satisfactory account than when he started. Indeed, given the hundreds of thousands of pages of evidence and speculation surrounding him and the hundreds more brought in every day, the possibility of his ever doing so becomes ever more remote. DeLillo's narrator, on the other hand, does present a plausible⁴ history of the assassination by constructing two lines of action that eventually intersect: the unhappy life of Lee Oswald, and the activities of a renegade group of CIA-connected plotters bent on refueling anti-Castro sentiment by shooting at (but missing) the President. DeLillo's storyteller waits until his narrative is finished to introduce himself and announce both his intentions and the speculative nature of his task: "This is a work of imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination" (DeLillo n.p.). Whether or not this note is part of the text is an open question; that it does not have a page number suggests an exterior status, yet given that it does appear between the covers of the book itself, and given the confidence it expresses in having provided "a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities," we can surmise that in it the storyteller invites us to consider the speculative nature of his story—or any constructor's account of the Kennedy assassination—and to take into account a writer's presence as the evidence-sifter who, like Nicholas Branch, has attempted to put it all together.

O'Brien and DeLillo thus joined what became a postmodern literary sub-genre of sorts, by foregrounding storytellers whose efforts to get their story told are frustrated by endless trails of conflicting or incomplete evidence, and by making the resultant point that history itself is a fictional construct that we have shielded ourselves from recognizing as such. Works as various as Ishmael

Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1977), Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), and Ben Marcus' *The Age of Wire and String* (1998) all employed similar narrative strategies to convey this same message.⁵ What distinguishes these two efforts by O'Brien and DeLillo is the attempt made in each to thoroughly reconstruct an individual's habitual patterns of thought, and thereby challenge the ratiocinative processes we all go through in constructing conceptions of others. My use of the term "habit" here assumes a distinction between habits defined as merely repetitive actions and those defined as acquired, unconscious predispositions toward action. As John Dewey put it in a formulation that remains useful, "we must bear in mind that the word disposition means predisposition, readiness to act overtly in a specific fashion whenever opportunity is presented . . . the disposition waiting as it were to spring through an opened door. . . . Repetition is in no sense the essence of habit" (41-2). My approach is also informed by Pierre Bourdieu's conception of habitus as the internalization of social externality, the social made personal: "a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (95). Both authorial figures in these novels depict the development of a protagonist's lifelong disposition toward retreat, a response to what the protagonist experiences as a painful, confusing reality. Ultimately, this retreat comes to suggest the reflexive denial that we all enact when we think we know and understand another person. John Wade's withdrawal is to an interior world of magic, a secret place where he believes he can make bad memories and even himself disappear. Oswald's inner world is one of subterfuge, clandestine gatherings, and revolutionary action. Both storytellers speculatively trace the development of this habitual withdrawal, from its beginnings in a traumatized childhood to its hardening into an unconscious, dangerously reactionary response to the demands of adulthood.

As both narrators tacitly acknowledge, it can take a long time to convince ourselves that we understand certain individuals, especially when we detect in them a tendency toward secrecy. The efforts of these narrators to understand the individuals they are trying to reconstruct are further frustrated by absence—gunman Jack Ruby deleted Oswald, and Wade has disappeared into either the Lake of the Woods or Canada. The tendency of these two men (mentioned repeatedly by those who knew them) toward secretive, sly withdrawal becomes the subject of each narrative investigation, and each storyteller works his way back to his subject's childhood in a search for its root causes.

As DeLillo's young Lee moves with his meandering mother from Texas to the Bronx to New Orleans, he develops a sense of himself as an outsider. Bereft of a father, set adrift from city to city by a perpetually bewildered parent whose inability to hold onto a job renders life with her son "a dwindling history of moving to cheaper places" (DeLillo 5), and faced with bristling hostility by each new group of schoolmates, Lee has reason enough to seek refuge from the real world. He faces each new beating by the latest gang of antagonists with the conviction that, as a social worker writes of him, "there is a veil between him and other people through which they cannot reach him" (12). Lee is unafraid of fights—not because he is especially tough, but because he decides that he himself is not out there in the world being beaten up again. Thus he adopts a sly, knowing smile in the face of the world's adversities: "this is a boy," his mother muses, "who grins while they are beating him up and waits for national news on TV" (48). DeLillo's narrator speculates that Lee Oswald had developed early on a predisposition toward retreating from reality in the belief that "there is a world inside the world" (13) and that he would find a place for himself in it to prepare for entrance into the "stream of history" figured on television.

O'Brien's storyteller gathers that John Wade had a difficult childhood as well. He imagines Wade remembering himself as being overweight and shy, repeatedly accused of being a "jiggling," "blubby little pansy" by an abusive, alcoholic father who eventually committed suicide. Wade's early response to a frightening reality

may simply have been to erase its worst parts: "as a kid, he'd learned the secret of making his mind into a blackboard. Erase the bad stuff. Draw in pretty new pictures" (O'Brien, *Lake* 133). As Wade's mother remembers in the first bit of evidence offered by O'Brien's narrator, "He was always a secretive boy. I guess you could say he was obsessed by secrets" (8). Wade is depicted as having responded to the world's abuses by gradually constructing a personal, internal space, a space in which, like Lee Oswald, he perfected skills for the purpose of someday making an impact on the outside world.

As an adolescent, DeLillo's Oswald develops a doubled self-consciousness, a pair of conceptions of himself occupying two different worlds, one in which he acts out the role of a socially acceptable, anonymous self, and another in which his "real" self searched for a role in an alternative, secretive reality.⁶ Having withdrawn from McCarthyite America, Lee is drawn to a place he envisions as a better field for action, the tantalizing specter of America's apparent opposite, the Soviet Union: "the other world, the secret that covers one-sixth of the land surface of the earth" (DeLillo 33). He spends "serious time at the library" struggling with Marx's *Das Kapital* and absorbing heroic depictions of the leaders of class struggle, justifying his withdrawal from American life by preparing to take part in the struggle against it (33). His developing predisposition toward covert action is further bolstered by such episodes as being ushered out the door by a neighboring father, who overhears Lee proselytizing to his children about the evils of capitalism, episodes that teach him that such interests need to be kept secret. Choosing to isolate himself in the increasingly familiar comfort of internal retreat, Lee occasionally registers an awareness that his main interest is in separating himself from other people: His primary attraction to the Soviet Union is to the withdrawal its social order seems to encourage in its members, an essential secretiveness. Lee's visions of communist activity also reflect his conception of it as secretive in nature; he imagines "men in small rooms" steering the course of history, and he searches repeatedly for a "communist cell" he can join. Having developed the habit of isolating himself in secrecy, Lee's countervailing attempts to reach out to others

are aimed for the most part at people who also seem interested in secrecy. As with O'Brien's John Wade, then, Lee's preparation for action in another part of the world is actually the manifestation of a developed disposition toward withdrawal from the American social matrix—he wants to go to Russia because it seems to be a place founded on secrets, full of citizens who have constructed double lives like his own.

Both narrators develop extensive metaphors for the internal withdrawals their characters perform. *Libra* opens with the young Lee sailing through the underground tunnels of New York, where “it did not seem odd to him that the subway held more compelling things than the famous city above” (DeLillo 4). Pressed against the forward window of the train's first car, Lee is thrilled by his sense of “a secret and a power,” by “the [headlight] beams pick[ing] out secret things,” and by “this secret force of the soul in the tunnels under New York” (13). The adolescent Lee's attraction to a submerged world of energies, a manifestation of his predisposition toward clandestine action, eventually leads him as an adult into defecting to Russia, then into engagement with members of a world of international plots and intrigue, men who have also developed the habit of subterfuge, their own affections for secrets. In an essay entitled “The Magic Show,” in which O'Brien argues for the necessity of mystery in fiction, he suggests that, as an adolescent, his own clandestine fascination with magic led naturally into his interest in writing: “As a kid, through grade school and into high school, my hobby was magic. . . . In the basement, where I practiced in front of a stand-up mirror, I caused my mother's silk scarves to change color. . . . It was illusion, of course—the creation of a new and improved reality” (174). In an interview for *The Paris Review* on his fictional efforts and methods, DeLillo spoke of a similar sense of secrecy he felt while conducting research for *Libra*: “The landscape was crawling with secrets, and this novel-in-progress was my own precious secret—I told very few people what I was doing” (292).

The internal retreat of O'Brien's young John Wade is also figured in a physical descent, but his underworld is the family basement, where he perfects his skills in the art of prestidigitation.

Hiding out from the difficult reality upstairs, John spends hours practicing in front of a mirror, growing excited by the feats he might one day perform: “tigers becoming giraffes, beautiful girls levitating like angels in the high yellow spotlights—naked maybe . . .” (O'Brien, *Lake* 31). At the age of fourteen, John's response is to abandon, and angry over his father's death, John's response is to turn further inward, imagining the adulation of others as he performs for them, as well as the magical feat of his father's cheerful return. He soon develops the convenient habit of carrying around a magical mirror inside himself: “he secretly kept the old stand-up mirror in his head. Pretending, of course—he understood that—but he felt calm and safe with the big mirror behind his eyes, where he could slide away behind the glass, where he could turn bad things into good things and just be happy” (65). Like DeLillo's Oswald, the Wade constructed by O'Brien's storyteller becomes convinced that the world itself works this way; thus as a young adult, he finds himself justifying his compulsion for spying on Kathy before their marriage with the thought that “the issue wasn't trust or distrust. The whole world worked by subterfuge and the will to believe” (emphasis in original, 33). This conviction, as well as his tendency to retreat to his own world inside the world, becomes a fixed, reflexive disposition in Wade, forming his responses to the pressures of war and guiding him toward the field of politics.

O'Brien's narrator posits that, as a young adult drafted into service in Vietnam, John Wade realized that he was in his element and that he even “loved the place . . . it felt like home” (O'Brien, *Lake* 73). Numerous bits of evidence suggest that his predilection for secrets may have led him to conceive of the war as a field of action every bit as secretive, mysterious, and therefore exciting, as Oswald's conception of the Soviet Union: “The war itself was a mystery. Nobody knew what it was about, or why they were there, or who started it, or who was winning, or how it might end. Secrets were everywhere—booby traps in the hedgerows, bouncing betties under the red clay soil. . . . Secrecy was paramount. Secrecy was the war. . . .” (O'Brien, *Lake* 73, emphasis in original). Wade's facility with such feats as card tricks, pulling a lighted cigar from his ear,

and “swallowing” a jackknife earns him the nickname of Sorcerer, a marker of the superstitious respect accorded him by his fellow soldiers. Extending his interest in magic into the theater of action in the real world, O’Brien’s Wade becomes a determined expert at what Erving Goffman famously termed “the arts of impression management”; having carefully honed these “attributes that are required of a performer for the work of successfully staging a character,” Wade is depicted as having spent the majority of his waking moments consciously and even aggressively manipulating from inside the impressions he made on others (Goffman 208). The narrator’s Wade knows in his calmer moments during the war who he is beneath the mask of Sorcerer, and his most artful move (although one that later backfires) is his removal, while working as a file clerk, of himself from the roles of Charlie Company and its involvement in the slaughter of Thuan Yen, a village mistakenly identified by popular history as My Lai.⁷ In battle, Wade occasionally finds himself losing sight of the fine line between magic and trickery, becoming awestruck, for example, at his own abilities to make whole villages “vanish.” However, for the most part, he revels in the mystique of his role as Sorcerer, enjoying both the attention and the sense of control it gives him.

The sense of control these protagonists gain through such psychological maneuvers—that reassuring sense both novels suggest we gain when we shape necessarily limited observations into coherent conceptions of the people we “know”—proves illusory for both Wade and Oswald. Both ultimately discover that their withdrawn preparations for action in the real world often do not result in decisive control over that world; Oswald’s efforts to make a difference in the Soviet Union, for example, eventually result in his retreat back to America, and Wade’s attempts at political trickery (figured most prominently by his failed attempt to erase his participation in the Thuan Yen massacre) result in devastating defeat. But lack of control is highlighted in its most chilling terms by the tendency these characters demonstrate to let the skills and decisive patterns of action they have developed slide into reflexive tendencies. While both characters maintain throughout most of

their adult lives a secure sense of control over themselves and over the impressions they make on the outside world, they nevertheless register at times a disturbing side-effect of their life-long interests in retreat, a breakdown of their skills in the arts of impression management into instances of involuntary, reflexive withdrawal from the world. O’Brien’s narrator speculates, for instance, that during the Vietnam War, Wade often felt himself retreating inward, through no particular effort of his own, at particularly distressing or threatening moments.

In the dramatization of Wade’s activities as a soldier, he first notices this slide inward after a sergeant’s brains are turned “smooth and liquid” by a sniper. Wade feels “something he’d never felt before, a force so violent it seemed to pick him up by the shoulders” (O’Brien, *Lake* 40). In the grip of this phenomenon, which he later names “the glide,” Wade is only partly there, vaguely aware that his body is acting under its own volition; after slipping up behind the sniper and killing him, Wade has difficulty piecing together various remembered snippets of having made “the little man’s cheekbone” disappear (40). He returns from the war a highly decorated veteran, presumably for performing many other such feats, but his withdrawal into the glide during the slaughter of Thuan Yen also results in his reflexive shooting of not only an elderly Vietnamese man, but also one of his fellow soldiers, PFC Weatherby. Of particular pertinence to the book’s point about how easily we accept faulty reconstructions of both history and the people we know is Wade’s further retreat from acknowledgement that the entire episode even happened:

In the months and years ahead, John Wade would remember Thuan Yen the way chemical nightmares are remembered, impossible combinations, impossible events, and over time the impossibility itself would become the richest and deepest and most profound memory.

This event could not have happened. Therefore it did not. Already he felt better. (O’Brien, *Lake* 108–09)

The narrator’s compelling depiction of Wade’s gradual slippage into reflexive denial makes it all the more plausible, of course, that

he responded to the pressures of a lost election by retreating into "the glide" on the night that Kathy disappeared. Readers are led to surmise that Wade must have been tottering on the edge of "no control" when he poured boiling water on houseplants, so it seems not impossible that he could have performed the unthinkable by pouring boiling water on his wife, and then sinking her body in the Lake of the Woods (itself a metaphor, of course, for the labyrinthine inward paths that the narrator imagines Wade having built, an ever-confusing network in which he eventually could have lost himself). Given the habit he has developed throughout his life of disappearing inwardly during moments of heightened stress or danger, and of then convincing himself that the impossibly horrible never happened, it would seem that he could have repressed the episode entirely. O'Brien suggests the normalcy of this phenomenon by offering as "Evidence" a litany of instances of actual court testimony, in which those present at the My Lai Massacre failed to remember certain of its crucial or gruesome details (O'Brien, *Lake* 137–38). As the narrator comments at one point, "it's odd how the mind erases horror" (298), but as the novel taken as a whole implies, it's also oddly disturbing how accustomed we can become to doing so and to ignoring the potential for such horrors in the people we know.

The frustration experienced by the many characters, and especially by the narrators, who attempt to know and understand these two men is heightened by the virtual impenetrability of the protective walls they have built around their self-conceptions. For such psychologically reclusive people, intimacy poses another threat, making it all that much more difficult for others to decide that they know them. Both Oswald and Wade are depicted as having paradoxically longed for intimate contact and mutual trust with others, a desire they enact by getting married. However, their belief that "the whole world worked by subterfuge" (O'Brien, *Lake* 33, emphasis in original) leads them to shrink from instances of real intimacy, especially when others reach out for contact with them. It is the repeatedly futile attempts at intimacy with these men, carried out most extensively by their wives and by the narrators, that most

fully signals the likely frustration of any sincere efforts to understand the deepest motives, and thus the potential behaviors, of another.

Oswald squirms from intimate contact with several members of his family, deciding under the embrace of his mother upon his return from Russia, for instance, that "all this love and pain confused him. This blood depth of feeling. He felt a struggling pity and regret" (DeLillo 227). Oswald's tendency to withdraw from intimacy is more fully suggested in the narrator's speculative depiction of his first sexual encounter, which takes place while Oswald is stationed as a marine in Japan: "He saw himself having sex with her. He was partly outside the scene. He had sex with her and monitored the scene, waiting for the pleasure to grip him, blow over him like surf, bend the trees. He thought about what was happening rather than saw it, although he saw it too" (DeLillo 84–85). Such instances suggest that an adult Oswald's retreat from the world was a reflexive withdrawal from stressful situations, even when he wanted to remain an active participant, and they suggest again the difficulty in store for anyone who tries sincerely to know such a person. While Oswald, having adopted the name Alek while trying to fit into the Soviet Union, becomes acquainted with his future wife, Marina, she realizes that "she was not sure who Alek really was. . . . He was never fully there" (202). As the couple's subsequent attempts to establish a middle-class existence in America descend into violent misery, Marina's awareness of Lee's perpetual withdrawal continues: "She saw him from a distance even when he was hitting her. He was never fully there. . . . He is someone you see from a distance" (241).

In his depictions of John Wade's personal life, O'Brien's narrator posits a similar discomfort when others get too close. At several points, for instance, Wade tries to tell his wife Kathy that he doesn't "feel real sometimes. Like I'm not *here*" (O'Brien, *Lake* 73, emphasis in original). As her sister recalls in an "Evidence" chapter, Kathy had tried to trust her husband, but she had also lived in suspicion and fear about the secrets he seemed to be holding inside. "Sometimes it feels like I'm living with this *door*," the narrator has Kathy tell Wade at one point, "I keep pushing but the damn thing's stuck shut . . ." (153, emphasis in original). She repeatedly

asks if John has something to hide, but his usual response is, "that's ridiculous" (153). When she questions him more closely, he again reassures her that he is withholding nothing. Thus at other moments when Wade does try to tell his wife that "something's wrong, I've *done* things," the narrator invites readers to surmise that Kathy, having tried repeatedly to talk to him about what he's keeping inside, has developed her own resigned habit of reassuring him that "it doesn't matter," that he doesn't have to talk about it (74, emphasis in original). Like Oswald, Wade has developed effective, reflexive mechanisms for keeping inquisitive others at bay, making it difficult for even those closest to him to understand or help him.

O'Brien shifts toward a broader suggestion of how widespread such reflexive recoil can be by having his narrator react to the idea of John Wade pouring boiling water on his wife. This is an image that many readers will find unbearable, an image to thrust away, if possible. Indeed, despite repeated mention of such persistently suggestive bits of evidence as the blanched houseplants and a tea kettle thrown in the trash, the narrator himself retreats from serious consideration of this possibility with surprising alacrity: "Finally it's a matter of taste, or aesthetics, and the boil is one possibility that I must reject as both graceless and disgusting" (O'Brien, *Lake* 300). By this point O'Brien's narrator has presented a good deal of evidence strongly suggesting that Wade very well may have made another reflexive, atavistic retreat that night into the mindless bestiality called forth by such traumatic events as the massacre at Thuan Yen. Yet the very horror of such a suggestion renders it an impossibility for the narrator. Thus does O'Brien's ruminative information-gatherer replicate in one of many metafictional activities the habit of denial. The refusal of both Wade and the narrator, who is so dogged elsewhere in his pursuit of explanations, to contemplate nightmarish events and their implications further bolsters the point both of these works make that we all perform similar, and similarly reflexive, retreats when we construct conceptions of the past or of people we know. Here, we are reminded that we often do so without keeping in mind the message of history's innumerable, senseless slaughters, that the potential for horrific violence lurks within us all;

both narrators ultimately face frustration in their quest to understand their protagonists, but they do go further than most of us in their efforts to "bear witness to the mystery of evil," as figured in the apparent actions of Oswald and Wade (O'Brien, *Lake* 199).

DeLillo's narrator offers his explanation for Oswald's descent into a murderous state by depicting, during the assassination, the most heightened instance of Oswald's tendency to withdraw involuntarily from the scene at hand. Having decided that what makes it onto the television screen constitutes the important historical events of his time, and having decided also to enter history by somehow appearing within the mass media's representations of it, DeLillo's Oswald persistently retreats from the present to "monitor" the scene from a perspective from which he can see himself as others would, if he were in a movie, or on television, or in a magazine article about himself. Oswald finds himself doing so again as he peers through his rifle scope for a third shot at President Kennedy. Just prior to squeezing the trigger, he sees something "blazing off the president's head" and is thus distracted into shooting far off his mark (DeLillo 400). Realizing that an accurate shot has come from other members of the plot he has been involved in, Oswald retreats into fantasized images of himself, preparing yet again for action in the future:

He was already talking to someone about this. He had a picture, he saw himself telling the whole story to someone, a man with a rugged Texas face . . . Telling how he was tricked into the plot. What is it called, a patsy? He saw a picture of an office with a tasseled flag, dignitaries in photos on the wall. (400-01)

In an interview, DeLillo has spoken of Oswald as "a man who has to enter his own Hollywood movie to see who he is and how he must direct his fate" (Begley 303). Repeatedly frustrated in his efforts to manage the impressions he makes on the world at large, DeLillo's Oswald finally succeeds in making an impact through "an act of violent theater" (Begley 303), the perversely logical extension of his habitual retreat from fully engaged immersion in the ordinary struggles of everyday life.

In our attempts to know others, most of us stop far short of the investigative efforts these narrators undertake to understand their subjects, having developed the habit of quickly deciding that we know and can trust most of our acquaintances. Both works finally suggest that when we convince ourselves that we know and understand someone, we do so in unacknowledged ignorance of most of another's past and potential actions. This broader point is made when both narrators, after making sincere, even dogged efforts to understand through dramatization the motives and causes for the behavior of their characters, finally acknowledge the futility of their efforts. This futility is subtly suggested in both works by a narrative regression into an infinity of replicated images, bits of evidence, supposition, and hearsay, a looping backward that replicates the frustration sure to face any earnest investigator into the thoughts, desires, and motives of another.

In DeLillo's dramatization of Oswald's last moments after being shot by Ruby, the trauma initially triggers Oswald into his reflexive retreat, bringing to his mind scenes from his Marine Corps days. He is pulled back into the present, though, by a nearby television, which is already showing instant replays of his death: "He could see himself shot as the camera caught it. Through the pain he watched TV. . . . He was in pain. He knew what it meant to be in pain. All you had to do was see TV" (DeLillo 439-40). Oswald has finally, paradoxically, found contact with his own sensations by watching himself being shot. He has also managed to enter the stream of history as figured on television, but in thus becoming a simulated, endlessly reiterated image of himself, he retreats forever from anyone who would try to know him. Beryl Parmenter, wife of one of the CIA-connected plotters, finds herself transfixed that night by the television's repeated image of Oswald being "shot, and shot, and shot" (447). She is especially fascinated by "something in [his] look, some sly intelligence. . . . [which] tells us that he is outside the moment, watching with the rest of us" (446). Beryl Parmenter has been depicted earlier, clipping out newspaper stories "about a violent act, a crazed man, a bombed Negro home," and sending them, instead of letters, to people she knows (261). She tells herself

as she does so that the reported records of these acts "are the things that tell us how we live" (261). Her actions suggest an awareness of the spreading pervasiveness of the media into nearly every aspect of American life, and perhaps also of the ways in which the media tell us how to live. Thus she stays in front of the television on the night of Oswald's death, "feeling that it was cowardly to hide" (447). DeLillo suggests that those who "hide" from "the tide of speculation that widens with the years" in the simplistic belief that Oswald acted alone are indeed enacting the cowardly impulse to ignore chaos by "seek[ing] refuge" from the endless and endlessly discomfiting evidence in the most reassuring reconstruction of events" (DeLillo "author's note"). On the other hand, those who would seek the truth can only hope to stem the mounting tide of evidence by blocking out most of it and seizing on certain especially suggestive fragments, such as the crucial seven seconds of the Zapruder film or the image of Oswald being shot, then examining them exhaustively in a search for some conclusive grain of truth.

Near the end of *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien's narrator also produces the effect of a similarly frustrating, and similarly endless, looping back into evidence-sifting. As John Wade sits in a boat before broadcasting a ruminative, meandering monologue, he ponders his own past, only to find various parts of it coming to mind again and again:

he could not stop returning. All night long he visited the village of Thuan Yen, always with a fresh eye, witness to the tumbings and spinings of those who had reached their fictitious point of no return. Relatively speaking, he decided, these frazzle-eyed citizens were never quite dead, otherwise they would surely stop dying. Same-same for his father. Proof of the loop. The fucker kept hanging himself. (O'Brien, *Lake* 283)

Like DeLillo, O'Brien suggests here that when we are faced with mind-boggling mysteries, our search for answers often devolves into endless contemplations of the same seemingly significant memories, images, events, or supposed facts. In his last "Hypothesis" chapter, the narrator finds himself ensnared in such loops of speculation

when he imagines that “on the porch that night, in the fog, John Wade had promised his wife Verona¹²⁸” (O’Brien, *Lake* 299, footnote in original). In footnote 128, the narrator writes that “even this is conjecture, but what else is there? See Crossan, footnote 123” (299). Diligent readers are thus led back to a quote from John Dominic Crossan’s *The Historical Life of Jesus*, a quote which sums up tidily a central claim made by both O’Brien and DeLillo: “If you cannot believe in something produced by reconstruction, you may have nothing left to believe in” (O’Brien, *Lake* 294; 426 in Crossan). Going back to where they were, on page 299, readers encounter a few sentences later another footnoted directive to go backwards, this time to ponder the implications of an entire chapter. Another footnote in the same sentence also sends readers to another previous footnote. O’Brien’s narrator may seem like a rather perverse trickster by this point, but the purpose is to prod readers into their own simulation of the loop that restless memory often becomes. Indeed by this point, most careful readers have probably already conducted their own back-and-forth reconsiderations of evidence in an effort to decide whether or not John killed Kathy. Two readers I know, unable to accept the inconclusive ending, reported returning immediately to the first page to start the book again. Even a fresh search is inevitably frustrating, however, since, as Steven Kaplan notes of *The Things They Carried*, “the only thing that can be determined at the end of the story is its own indeterminacy” (47).⁸

Both of these novels’ narrators construct compelling portraits of their subjects, only to undercut their own efforts with this metafictional looping effect. This effect, reenacted in the process itself of carefully reading these texts, dramatizes the point that anyone seeking truths beyond tempting, but inevitably imperfect, reconstructions of another can only encounter repetitive bits of naggingly suggestive evidence—especially if the subjects of their inquiry are as habitually elusive as people like DeLillo’s Lee Oswald and O’Brien’s John Wade. But as O’Brien’s narrator asks, even if the people we try to know are more familiar, “our own children, our fathers, our wives and husbands: Do we truly know them?” (*Lake* 295). These two works suggest that to believe we do “know” them

is to retreat into the comforting, inevitable habit of believing in what amounts to a character, a protagonist who exists in a story that we’ve largely cobbled together through sheer speculation.

Notes

1. I will use the term “authorial figure” to distinguish the narrating personae developed by O’Brien and DeLillo from standard third-person and first-person narrators.
2. For other detailed discussions of O’Brien’s use of metafictional elements, see Calloway, Heberle, Timmerman, and Worthington. On metafictional elements in DeLillo’s *Libra*, see Carmichael, Hutchinson, Johnson, Ickstad, and Wilcox.
3. DeLillo carefully highlights, at several points, the distinction between the names used for Oswald by himself and the people he knew versus the media’s eventual use of his full name. The text closes with an ironic use of the latter by Oswald’s mother, Marguerite; she has previously referred to him as Lee throughout, but she now thinks of him as “Lee Harvey Oswald. No matter what happened, how hard they schemed against her, this was the one thing they could not take away—the true and lasting power of his name. It belonged to her now, and to history” (456).
4. Of course, some readers found DeLillo’s imaginative reconstruction of events entirely implausible. See Yardley, who denounced the novel as “beneath contempt,” and Will, who called it “an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship.”
5. See Muller for a persuasive argument that North American historiographic metafiction can be traced at least as far back as the work of Charles Brockden Brown; see also Hutcheon, Inger, Scholes, and Waugh for further discussion of the elements and development of this genre.
6. For discussion of a similar bifurcation in O’Brien’s characters, see Nelson’s contention that, in several of his other works, O’Brien “deals with the Vietnam question in terms of whether it is better to obey, in Fromm’s terms, an ‘authoritarian’ or a ‘humanistic’ conscience” (262).
7. As Michael notes, Oswald makes similarly extensive attempts to “script himself a role” in history: “[Oswald] continuously constructs roles for himself—the communist sympathizer, the defector, the pro-

Castro agitator, the lone gunman. He even creates several aliases, complete with paperwork" (150–51).

8. The metafictional effect for readers here recalls a similar narrative effort to push careful readers of *The Things They Carried* into reliving something of the characters' experiences. As Kaplan notes of that work, "representation includes staging what might have happened in Vietnam, while simultaneously questioning the accuracy and credibility of the narrative act itself. The reader is thus made fully aware of being made a participant in a game, in a 'performative act,' and thereby is also asked to become immediately involved in the incredibly frustrating act of trying to make sense of events that resist understanding" (48).

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